

A/N:

I put this disclaimer up once and it applies to THIS ENTIRE WORK:

The characters, the universe and anything you can obviously recognize DO NOT belong to me and are the property of JK Rowling and whoever owns the copyrights.

There will be large chunks of canon material where I have made minor adjustments and changes to fit with my story as I am rewriting JKR's work to suit my taste, style and preferences. Therefore, that obviously belongs to her.

There is a prequel to this fic entitled "Years at War, Part 1: Triwizard Warfare." I would suggest reading that fic before reading this one so that you understand fully just what is going on.

This is written with realism. Blood, violence, sex, foul language all of it. If you want to read a kill-the-bad-guys-with-a-happy-grin-superhero-powers fanfic, do not read this. If you read the prequel, enjoyed it then I hope you will enjoy this as much, if not more.

I have ZERO TOLERANCE for flames of any kind. For the record, if you read, do not like and can explain/justify what and why you don't like something, that IS NOT a flame. If you flame, I WILL report you to the site admins.

For the Record: This is a work in progress. I may take it down, rewrite, change things. If you have a problem with that, please see the previous point about flames.

A point of interest was raised by a reviewer, xavierp: In the UK, they have terms, not semesters. Corrected accordingly.

Finally my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Nachtrae for taking the time to read, edit and comment on this Chapter. She does amazing work and I'm lucky to have her as my beta.

Chapter 21

Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration with the announcement of the winner of the Inter-House Championship. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he entered, with the other Champions and his retinue, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. Normally the colors of the house that won the Inter-House Championship would decorate the Leaving Feast. Tonight, there were black drapes along the walls, and even the four banners over the house tables seemed somehow, muted. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric and Hermione.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry could not blame him; Moody's fear of attack was bound to have increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away. Why... why... was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk."

Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table, ended Harry's musings. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet. "The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year." He paused, and his eyes ran over the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, both easily the most subdued.

His eyes locked with Harry's for an instant and Harry met the look with a full on glare. The headmaster blinked and nodded every so slight towards Harry. Harry didn't even blink. "There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must

first acknowledge the losses of two young people, both of whom should be sitting here, surrounded by friends," he gestured towards the two tables, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Hermione Granger and Cedric Diggory."

They did, all of them: The benches scraped as everyone stood, raising their goblets high in to the air. Their voices rumbled out together like a thunderclap, echoing the names of each in turn. Harry's voice caught in his throat but he gutted through, noting distantly that Fleur had done the same over Cedric.

The headmaster's eulogy went unheard by Harry, who was staring down memory lane at something only he could see, "...deaths have affected you all, whether you knew them well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about." Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore, "Hermione Granger was murdered by Lord Voldemort," he paused for an instant and nodded, to them all, "Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence. "The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so - either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you as you are too young to understand. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that two of Hogwarts finest, of our finest died in an accident or some blunder of their own is an insult to them and their memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now... or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore. "There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with their deaths," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore. "Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He

risked his own life, returning with the wand of Cedric Diggory for his parents, and with the remains of Hermione Granger for her parents. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery, the courage that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured the others, and drank to him. This was too much. He needed to get out of the Great Hall. However, Luna took his hand on the left, while Ginny squeezed his shoulder gently on the right. They were not trying to keep him here he realized quickly, there was no strength in their grips, just an offer of quiet support.

Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them. Harry made a silent note of the faces of those who had remained seated, and those that had toasted not only him, but Cedric and Hermione as well, from all four houses.

When everyone had once again resumed his or her seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened - of Lord Voldemort's return - such ties are more important than ever before." Harry paused to consider the words of his headmaster, and wondered, whether this had been the point: To prepare the wizarding world for what was to come, and that everything were unintended side effects.

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh. "Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. We are all facing dark and difficult times."

"Remember Cedric. Remember Hermione. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a young man and a woman who were honorable, proud, loyal, kind, and brave. Remember them. Remember Hermione Granger. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig sat upon his shoulder, preening herself. His friends circled around him, sending a clear message to all that disturbances would not be welcome - all of them had their wands in plain sight, sticking out of pockets or in visible wand holsters - as they waited for the carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy; its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"Harry," he looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Across the grounds, Hagrid and Madame Maxine were wrestling two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off, "We will see each other again, I hope." She bowed slightly, and Harry returned the shallow bow, Champion to Champion. He held out his hand and she tutted, "Such formality does not suit you," She pulled him in to a full hug and Harry was somewhere else for a moment. "I am hoping to get a job to improve my English," she said, her eyes wandering to his hair, yet again.

His friends had noticed and said nothing, because they did not know what they could say. Harry's hair was no longer the midnight black it used to be, there were shots of silver and grey and strangely enough, a long strip of brown hair twisted in to a braid that was long enough to tuck behind his right ear. He had changed his hair sometime after the tournament and before the leaving feast, but nobody was sure exactly when. Like the masses however, he was not sure when he had created that braid of hair.

"It's very good already," Harry said, "But I will always have time, if you need someone to practice with." She smiled and turned away, saying good-bye to the retinue, in particular the three Weasleys. He let himself just absorb her beauty for a few moments, tall, willowy, with a grace and poise that made it seem like she was gliding when

she walked. She laughed at something Fred said and her silvery blonde hair shimmered in to the morning sunlight. He could not help as his spirits lifted slightly, watching her hurry across the lawns to a waiting Madame Maxime.

"Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Neville, "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the work." Krum had come to say good-bye, "Could I have a word?" he asked Harry. With a nod, Krum cast a quick silencing charm around them. Harry added a privacy charm and several others that he had learned, "Impressive."

Harry shrugged, "Wand's taking some getting used to, but I don't think it'll mind me too much." He had put on a neutral expression, and a few subtler charms hid the more obvious signs that he had not been sleeping well, "But wands only focus the magic... and with the tournament over, I'm back to being a regular teenager," he said with snort.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He was always polite to me. Even though I was from Durmstrang..." Karkaroff being what he had been, nothing else need be said, "You are no regular teenager, Harry Potter. Hermione," he hesitated, knowing that his poor English could land him in several cauldrons of hot water, "She was a good friend... she loved you. Not "Boy who lived" or "Chosen one" or "Champion." She loved Harry Potter. She will always be with you in your heart, your soul. Treasure those memories, Harry. They will bring you strength, comfort, and..." Viktor hesitated for a moment, "She, will keep you honest, if you let her. I think that is what your headmaster fears the most."

The insightful comments made by the Bulgarian Seeker did not startle him in the slightest. Neville had made the same observation once before. Nevertheless, Harry nodded to show his understanding of what was said without it actually being said, "Have you got a new headmaster yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, to shake Harry's hand. Harry pulled the Quidditch star in to a hug. Victor froze up, tense and then relaxed and returned the hug, slapping Harry on the back as he did so, "Good bye my friend." said Viktor, "May our

paths cross in the future when all is at peace in our world." The Bulgarian strode back to his ship, where he would be the acting captain for his voyage home, "Remember this however," called Viktor, "Ci vis pacem, para bellum!"

"What's that mean?" shouted Harry after him.

"If you desire peace, prepare for war!"

Harry smiled at the Bulgarian's back as he heard the first of the carriages pull up behind him, "If you want peace, prepare for war" Shrinking his trunk with a wave of his wand, he pocketed it and began to walk. Hogsmeade station was not that far. Moreover, he felt like he could use the exercise.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There was not a single cloud in the sky. Harry and his Retinue - or perhaps former retinue would be more appropriate now that the tournament was over - had taken over an entire compartment and with Harry's magic, enlarged it so that they could all fit comfortably. Hedwig was dozing with her arm under her wing; Crookshanks was a giant orange cushion on a spare seat. Conversation was quiet, and subdued and focused on what their next course of action would be. They somehow, felt liberated by Dumbledore's speech at the leaving feast.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"You seem to be missing someone, or two," said Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them. "So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. Crabbe and Goyle leered. "Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry. He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledores eulogy. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. He flexed his fingers and his knuckles cracked like a string of firecrackers.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you - you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff!" He jerked his head towards an empty seat and then grinned, "Oh... that's right, the Mudblood's already..."

A box of fireworks would have made less noise as no fewer than seven wands unleashed a blistering barrage of magic. Fifteen seconds and some twenty spell chained hexes later; Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway.

"Interesting effect," said Fred, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed." He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face, "Well, let's not leave them here, they don't add much to the decor."

Neville, Harry and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle - each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit - out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Luna, pulling out a pack of cards. The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer and that he would never arrive at King's Cross. However, as he had learned the hard way that time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark and after watching Neville struggle over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, he shrunk everyone's trunks, except for the twins, "Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry unshrunk his trunk and drew out the small bag with a thousand galleons in winnings from the Triwizard Cup. "Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said, "But how did you know...."

Harry shrugged, "When you're friends with a Goblin Banker, and he finds out you two trying to take out loans by owl, that and you are both the biggest pranksters Hogwarts has seen in the past fifteen or so years..." Harry almost smirked. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain or donating it," he added it as an afterthought, "I don't want it, and I don't need it. However, I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams or Bathtub Tidal Waves that is." The twins stared at him. "Just don't tell your mum where you got it... although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it..."

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "Take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now."

The twins filed out and he took a last look around the compartment and finally walked out, taking great care to step on Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks. For the first time in months, Ron stepped up and blocked Harry's path, "Harry... can we... talk?"

He sized up Ron, carefully and noticed the wand sticking out of the side pocket of his jeans. "Not sure what we have to talk about," Harry said bluntly, "but I can think of a few things: Loyalty, for one.

Trust, another. Treachery, a third." His voice had dropped in to a growl. "What did you want to talk about?"

Ron hesitated, "I just wanted to... say I'm sorry, for not believing, for abandoning you, and for Hermione...She was my friend...."

Harry's eyes blazed, "Don't you ever say that name!" he snarled, and "I saw you at the Leaving Feast! I saw you refuse to stand and toast because your "friends" in Slytherin didn't!" Harry's finger slammed in to Ronald's chest; hard enough to drive the redhead back a step, "You have not been her friend this past year! Or mine! She didn't need me to prove anything Ron! She believed me, because I am Harry Potter, her friend since first year! Not "Boy-who-lived!" Not "Chosen One!" You never had the courage to stand by your friends!" the last cut like a knife in to Ron, "I will repeat what I told you and your mother, before the third task," Ron wisely kept his mouth shut, "What I told you once before - months ago! I have more money in my vault than I know what to do with! So again, I ask you, why the fuck I would risk life and limb for one thousand galleons? Fame and the spotlight?" he jerked his hand up to his scar, "I am fame's personal plaything! I'm the spotlight's eternal bitch!" It was not a moment of compassion for the Slytherin trio when he waved his Hermione's wand at them, "Enervate Plurios!"

"How the Sorting Hat cast you in Gryffindor, I'll never know!" roared Harry as weeks of bottled anger and fury erupted, "You did worse than stand idly by and do nothing! You joined the very people that made three years of your, mine and Hermione's life hell whenever they could!" The hexed threesome was stirring slightly, "And I heard about you and Daphne Greengrass! And Cho Chang! You made your bed in Slytherin House!" his voice dropped, "I could have forgiven that. My Hermione, could have forgiven that too. But what I cannot forgive, is that you went along like another one of Malfoy's thugs the night of the leaving feast, when you refused to stand and toast the fallen. You went along and made your bed amongst my enemies!" Harry took a deep breath, "I call you friend no more! I rescind the friendship between us! I break all bonds and ties with you! You made your bed! Sleep in it! Oath Breaker!"

Though Harry had shouted, rained accusations and even had solid proof to convict Ron, it was the last insult the rammed it home to Ron, that this friendship was shattered. The second youngest Weasley stared at his former best mate, whose voice had dropped,

wand grasped in a white-knuckle grip. The threatening growl of Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody had nothing on Harry as his wand rose and he stabbed Rob in the chest with the dragon heartstring and vine wood wand he had claimed as his own, "Tell your slithering friends that next year, the gloves are off. They step a millimeter out of line and what I will do them, let's just say magic won't be able to undo or grow back!"

Left to his thoughts for a long moment, Ron Weasley felt his feet go damp and looked down with a snarl of aggravation. Crookshanks had taken a moment to relieve himself, directly on Ron's boots. He snarled and kicked out. The cat leapt aside with a hiss and a flash of its claws slashed a long scratch wound across the boy's left ankle, "Crookshanks! Come!" barked Harry.

The cat gave Ron a last long, baleful glare, then trotted out after its new master, and then broke in to a run to catch up. Harry had stormed off the train and barely noticed the crowds of students as they parted around him the way the Red Sea had parted for Moses. Parents stared at him, some in awe, some in shock, and others in fear. He nodded curtly to his friends and passed through the barrier. There was nothing to explain. "Ah..." said George with a sage nod, "That confirms the cause of Harry's sudden ill temper..." Ron had appeared, supporting Draco who looked, slightly worse for wear with the footprints all over his robes.

Beyond the barrier, Uncle Vernon waited with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. They did not notice he was not pushing a trolley, or carrying a cage or that Hedwig was nowhere in sight. But then again, he doubted that they had even noticed him standing less than ten feet away. Harry eyed his relatives, and for the first time, wondered why he was going back to Privet Drive. There was nothing for him at No. 4, and in his current mood, he was more of a threat to them than anyone else...was. "Si vis Pacem, para Bellum," he said aloud, "If you want peace: Prepare for war."

Harry stalked up to his relatives, without so much as a hello, "Got things to take care of." That left all three Dursleys staring at him in shock, "Stay out of my way, and hopefully, I will not be around much during the summer."

Vernon Dursley gave Harry a once over and realized that the boy was different. Taller, stronger, filled out with muscle and a glint in his

eyes that made him nervous. Petunia was fanning herself with one hand, and using the other to restrain her husband for doing or saying anything unseemly. Harry Potter turned away from them, "I'll make my own way to Privet Drive – if I bother to drop by." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and plunged in to the crowd of emerging students and parents that had just stepped through the barrier. Cutting through that crowd, he slipped in to a group of muggles heading in the opposite direction.

Harry looked down at the cat alongside him, "Up!" The cat leapt in to Harry's arms, met his gaze and purred for a moment, "I miss her too," he whispered softly and he rubbed his head against Harry's chin.

Hedwig hooted gently and flapped her way down, sitting herself on Harry's opposite shoulder as far from Crookshanks as possible. Cat and owl eyed each other for a long moment, and came to some sort of agreement, "You two think you can get along?" Hedwig hooted. Crookshanks meowed, "I'll take that as yes."

They were not human. They were not exactly friends. Where Harry had adopted the former, the later had adopted him. Familiars could be as close to their chosen wizard or witch as family. Even closer.

Fuck his relatives.

They could look after themselves.

Chapter 22

Bank on the holidays

Like many other schools in the British Isles, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizard follows the same three terms per calendar year. The longest holiday period is the summer vacation that stretches from roughly the end of the third week in June to September 1 every year.

Harry Potter moved through the crowd of his schoolmates without a backward glance at the relatives that had come to collect him. They were still staring in shock and awe at what the ungrateful teenager brat had done. Vernon Dursely had been about to go after the boy when his wife tightened her grip on his arm, "Too many of his kind around!" she whispered.

Nymphadora Tonks of the Auror Corps was surprised by the sudden change in direction that Harry had taken and had nearly lost him amongst the crowd of students and then the second crowd of muggles. However, she managed to keep her cover intact and stay a safe distance behind her target. She had not exactly wanted the assignment but the recently resurrected Order of the Phoenix had risen from its ashes so quickly that its current strength was twelve witches and wizards including their leader: Albus Dumbledore.

She managed to slide into a muggle phone booth as Harry glanced over his shoulder, and then resumed her tracking as her target moved out in to the busy streets of muggle London. She lost him for the third time in almost as many minutes until she heard the clattering screech of air brakes from a narrow alley next to the station. She recognized the sound immediately: The Knight Bus.

Trapped on the side of the street and surrounded by muggles, there was no way she could pull her wand to flag down the bus and sure enough the bus screamed past her, squeezing its way in between vehicles and around pedestrians in a fashion that only the word "magical" can describe. It always struck her as somewhat strange that even wizarding folk did not see the Knight bus unless they were actively looking for it. She shrugged and used the same alley Harry had, apparating to the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Her report was sure to raise more than a few eyebrows.

Stepping off the knight bus outside the Leaky Cauldron, Harry paused at the door for an instant before forging ahead. Dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt he quietly debated his options and ducked in to the bathroom as quickly as he could. Once inside, he cast a number of charms in rapid succession. He left his hair unchanged, but concealed his scar with a glamour charm, and then altered the color of his eyes from their usual emerald green to a sapphire blue. He tapped his glasses with his wand and changed the color of the frames. Temporary at best, but it would suit his purposes for the moment.

The Leaky Cauldron had long served as the gateway between the muggle world and Diagon Alley. Founded in 1500 by Daisy Dodderidge, it was akin to the hotel for those who had extended business in the Alley. It was a good a place as any for the moment. Reemerging from the bathroom, Harry approached the current barman and innkeeper, a wizard he recalled named Tom. "Good Afternoon sir, what can I do for you?"

"Afternoon. I would like a room please," replied Harry, "Not sure how long I'll be staying though... could you put me down for a week?"

Tom nodded, "Certainly, Mr..."

"Harry... Harry Granger Evens" he replied, wincing at his own choice of name, "I'd like a room that overlooks Charing Cross Road... perhaps Number 11 is available?"

The bartender nodded with a smile, "Famous room that one. Harry Potter spent his entire summer stay there two years ago." Tom got only an icy nod from his newest resident, "I presume you can access the Alley?" he asked, quickly changing the topic.

The bar had a number of patrons seated, passing the time of day and Harry eyed them critically for a moment, "Three up, two across and tap three times."

The Alley was exactly as he had remembered it, the stores lined both sides of the streets but his destination was the white marble building that towered over every other structure: Gringotts Bank.

He moved with the flow of human traffic, overhearing snatches of conversation that covered everything from the price of Dragon Dung

at the Apothecary to the newest owl treats outside the Magical Menagerie. People around him got on with their lives, and so was he in a sense. However, why did he feel like he was going nowhere? On the other hand, perhaps he was going backwards.

The set of white stairs lead to the burnished bronze doors flanked by Goblins in a uniform of scarlet and gold. He recognized the emblem of a Galleon, Sickle and Knut, stacked one atop the other and pierced by a single sword: The Custodians were the only Goblins allowed to carry weapons through the public halls of the bank. He nodded to the Goblins Guards, "Blahgrast Diedom."

The guards blinked in surprise and then snapped to attention, "Blahgrast Diedom," one of the repeated. It was a common greeting but it was rare to hear a wizard not employed by the bank use it, "How may we be of assistance, wizard?" Harry drew his wand, very carefully to avoid an incident, and lifted the glamour charms before letting them take hold once more. Their eyes widened slightly in recognition, "Ursh-kai Potter, how may we be of service?"

Harry shook his head, "I am Ursh-kai no longer. The tournament has ended. I am simply Harry or Mr. Potter if formality requires it." He nodded towards the Bank doors, "I want... respectfully request a meeting with Senior Accounts Manager Griphook," he said.

"This way Mr. Potter." The goblin led the way inside through the small entrance hall. They stood before the second set of silver doors and Harry paused to read the words engraved. He had read them once before, four years ago; when he had learned he was a Wizard, with Hagrid:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there

Through those silver doors, flanked again by Custodians was the vast marble hall. The Goblin led him through one of the many hundreds of doors that lead off from the hall. The warren of offices was confusing, but the goblin knew the way, and like all members of the Custodians, could navigate the halls of the bank blindfolded. It was only a few minutes of twists and turns but Harry was lost by the time they arrived in Griphook's office.

The young man was only fourteen years old, but he had seen more cruelty and carnage in the past few weeks than many sees in a lifetime, "Mr. Potter, Griphook is in a meeting at present. He will see you as soon as possible." The guard nodded in the direction of long red silk rope hanging from the ceiling, "If you require anything, do not hesitate to ask."

Left alone, Harry took his time to study the walls of the office. The last time he had been here, he had not paid them any notice, but this time he noticed that the paintings and mosaics were actually telling a story: Griphook's life as a warrior, banker, financier, and even, as a father. Harry was not sure but he was convinced that the picture showed Griphook with two different goblin...women, and a different number of... children. He poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice and toyed idly with one of the cookies.

It was the first time in a long while that Harry had let himself be alone with his thoughts, and he found that they kept going back to the same thing. He could not distract himself from what he had witnessed that night in the graveyard: Cedric, Voldemort's rebirth, and then, then... what had come next. The duel, *priori incantatem*, the spirits, specters... whatever they were. So lost in the nightmare that only he could see and hear, Griphook had to call Harry twice to snap him out of his daze.

Harry rose to his feet, nearly spilling his glass of juice as he faced the banker and bowed, "Greetings Griphook, may your gold forever multiply." The goblin bowed in return. Formalities dispensed with Griphook embraced the young man before him, like a brother.

"How are you, my friend?" Griphook had the slight beginnings of a smile as they sat down. Harry stared off in to the near distance for a few long moments, wondering where to begin, or more exactly how to begin. "Sometimes, the beginning is not the best place to start. Sometimes, you start in the middle, and work your way towards the end that includes the beginning."

For some bizarre reason, the twisted logic made sense to Harry, "Nobody knows... what really happened that night, between Voldemort's resurrection and our duel." Griphook blinked, but nodded. He had suspected that the young man was holding something back but had not questioned him due to the headmaster's presence, "Griphook, he didn't just kill her..." his voice cracked ever so slightly and that was a cause for concern, "Cruciatus..." he could say nothing more. However, Harry did not have to.

Although the goblins had remained mostly neutral during the First Wizarding War, that decision was not without its consequences. Where wizards had lost family, friends and loved ones. The Goblin Nation had lost entire tribes, even whole clans to the rampage of Voldemort and his death eaters. Griphook himself knew of a number of Goblin widows and widowers, as it was rare amongst their kind to remarry after losing their loved one.

The Goblins had extracted payment in blood and whispered rumors had it that there are a number of Death Eaters who still slave away in the deepest, darkest recesses of the Goblin Empire. These men and women were captured when Voldemort still lived, were never surrendered to the Ministry of Magic and had never, seen daylight again, "Torture?" asked Griphook gently.

He nodded mutely, "I've, got no one, nothing." So few words, and they were laced with despair and a level of pain that made a mockery of what he had already achieved in his short life: Defeated Voldemort during his first year, slain a basilisk during his second, rescued his godfather during his third, and dueled Voldemort to draw less than six weeks ago. However, all of his achievements and accomplishments were for naught. All overshadowed by the single devastating loss he had borne witness.

Griphook could understand the pain and loss. He was, one of the lucky few to find another to love after both his sons were killed in battle, and his wife slain when their enclave was overrun in the early

years of Voldemort's first rise to power. "Harry," Goblins being what they are, understand the concept of tact, but do not necessarily apply it in daily life, "I do not know, what I can say." It did not take a genius to figure that saying something about understanding his pain would not go over well, but then again, "I can understand your pain."

The sharp look he got was something along the lines of what he hoped to get, the eyes of the young man were eagle sharp, predatory, and above all else, spoiling for a fight. Standing, he crossed his office towards the murals on the wall and nodded to Harry who joined him, "I can understand because I was there, when Voldemort made his first bid for power. He tried to subvert Gringotts to take control of the wizarding economy. At his command, the Death Eaters slaughtered hundreds of my kin," Harry stared at the mural, "Both of my sons were slain in battle. My first wife," he said quietly, "suffered the same fate as your Hermione." Griphook laid a hand on Harry's shoulder, "So yes. I know your pain, for I have experienced it and survived it."

"Does it, get... better?" asked Harry as he met the Goblin's stare head on.

"I can honestly say that it does." Said Griphook, "Time does help heal the wound, but time will never truly erase it." Griphook clapped Harry's shoulders, and for an outsider, the scene would have been a touch comical. Harry had a good two feet in height over the goblin that was just a hair's breadth over three feet tall. "Only you can fill the void that Hermione has left in you. The how will come in its time, when you are ready."

Harry was not sure, when it had happened, but he was sitting on the same comfortable sofa that he and Hermione had shared when... It seemed like everything around him was a memory landmine just waiting for him to step on it. He bit down on his tongue and it worked, distracting himself and preventing the tears pooling behind his eyes from falling, "Griphook," though his thoughts ran in every direction imaginable, Harry was able to marshal his thoughts, "I need help..." He began with everything that had happened just before he got off the Hogwarts Express, how he had realized the futility of going back to Privet Drive. He started in the middle and by the time he had finished speaking Harry realized something: Griphook, had been there, since the beginning. He knew and understood in a way even his Godfather could not understand, "And Blake, will do everything

he can, but right now, I'm not sure what he thinks is the right thing to do. I cannot even spend time with him because he has no claim to being my guardian."

"Harry," the goblin eyed him critically for a few long moments, "There is... something that I can do..." he emphasized the point, "I can do. Not Gringotts. Come." Together, the odd pair departed the office and Harry matched the Goblin's pace as they meandered through the warrens, "During the days of my childhood, one of our Farseers, made a prophecy," he said quietly, "We have a complete record of the prophecy, and I share this with you, because you deserve to know: It is about you."

"Me? Why was a prophecy made about me?"

Griphook shrugged, "I am not privy to the higher workings of fate and destiny. No mortal is. I know, I was relatively absent the past few weeks," something of an understatement as Harry had not seen the Goblin at all after providing the reports of the interrogations of Karkaroff and Barty Crouch Junior, "But I have met with the Goblin High Council and only just narrowly won the right to share this information with you."

They entered a large room. The cavern seemed to stretch for several miles in either direction. Shelves ran the length of the room, at least a dozen rows, each one he noticed held a mix of small glass spheres covered in dust, and neatly stacked rolls of parchment. Griphook led him down the left side of the room, until they came across a Goblin seated behind a desk surrounded by a befuddling array of floating words. Scanning the desk, Harry noted that there were copies of almost every publication in the wizarding world from the Daily Prophet to the Quibbler and Witch Weekly to muggle publications that included The Guardian, The Times, and even the International Herald Tribune, Time and Newsweek. Griphook nodded to the Goblin behind the desk, who froze whatever it was he was doing. "Archive item EHL98723, Prophecy, Stormseeker Clan."

It took only a few moments before the glass sphere exchanged hands between the Goblins. With a nod, Griphook led Harry through a door near the desk. The room was small, barely large enough for a dozen Goblins. The focus of the room was a screen and a muggle like movie projector. Griphook placed the sphere and dimmed the lights. It was clearly someone's memory.

It showed a goblin that was asleep except for the fact he floated about two feet of the ground, arms outstretched, with his head rolled back. His head snapped forward like a striking serpent, his eyes open but with only the whites visible as he began to speak in fits and starts as spasms wracked his body:

"Poisoned by the King of Serpents

Saved by the tears of the Light

A champion shall arise from amongst Champions

Saved by the tears of that which embodies the Light

He shall have the power to banish the seven times sundered soul of evil

Poisoned by King of Serpents

He shall have the power to remake the world to his will

Love shall be the key: To salvation or damnation"

The recording replayed itself twice more, by which time Harry had committed the words of the prophecy to memory. He stood there, puzzling it out for a moment, using every brain cell he could. He realized with a jolt that he fit the requirements of the prophecy. Griphook nodded, "It would appear, that my great, great, great grandmother Cassandra was speaking about you: Poisoned... King of Serpents,"

"Second year, basilisk," said Harry quietly. Another memory flashed through his mind: Of him sitting by a petrified Hermione in the hospital wing.

"Tears, embodies the light," said Griphook.

"Phoenix," he replied evenly

"Champion... from amongst Champions," continued Griphook.

Harry was lost for a moment, remembering what the spectre of Cedric had said to him in the graveyard, "They will call you Champion of the Light," he muttered, "Cedric... said that to me."

The Goblin nodded, "Given recent events, we know that you are the champion in question, for no Basilisk has been slain in over five hundred years, and that Basilisk slew the majority of its assailants. Those that survived, having long passed in to the next world." He sat down next to the teenager, who had already aged a decade in six weeks he had just aged another five years as he struggled to digest what he had just learned.

"That's... a lot to take in," he said weakly, "I'm going to need a few minutes."

Fully aware of Harry's living situation with the Dursleys, Griphook, was not going to allow that, "Perhaps, I can make a suggestion," at the nod he forged ahead, "I do not know why Albus Dumbledore wishes for you to return to the Dursley residence every summer. However, Gringotts is very likely the most secure location outside of Hogwarts itself. I cannot provide unshakable guarantees, but I believe it would be logical to assume that you would be safe, here."

Dumbledore. The name brought up a whole host of other memories, none of them pleasant. To think that he had actually once not only looked up to, but literally worshipped the headmaster who was, ultimately directly responsible for most, if not all of the pain and suffering he had endured in his life. His hands clenched the arms of the chair in anger.

Harry yelped in surprise as flames emerged from his hands and spread up his arms, before engulfing the armrests and the rest of the chair. Leaping up in surprise Griphook was quickest to cast the equivalent of a fire hose charm that doused the burning chair, and drenched Harry, but left him with both arms flaming from the elbows down, "Harry?"

The teen was no longer waving his arms around, and looked rather like a cat that had just scrambled out of a pond. The flame had burned the sleeves off his robes but so long as he kept his arms outstretched and pointed down, there was less risk of burning off the rest of his robes. "Griphook," Harry looked at down at his robes, "Maybe, you could fire proof what's left of my robes?"

Griphook complied as several other Goblins piled in with weapons drawn to investigate the magic cast, "Bank on my holidays to be as weird and bizarre as a typical term at Hogwarts," muttered Harry.

She appeared with barely a sound in the narrow alley between number 9 and 10, Grimmauld Place, and promptly tripped over a garbage can lying in plain sight. The crash was worrying, as was the pair of startled cats that shot out of the alley and across the street. She pressed herself against the wall, and cursed quietly. A moment, then a minute passed. Relieved that she had not given herself away, she walked out of the alley and along the street, until she came to number 12, Grimmauld Place.

Muggles had long accepted the mistake in numbering that landed number 11 and 13 next to each other. It was an open secret that Sirius Black's father had laid so many protective enchantments in to the building that the stone itself had absorbed the magic. Add to those layers of wards and protections was the Fidelius Charm with the Hogwarts headmaster as secret keeper meant that it was perhaps the most secure house, anywhere in the country.

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix was the ancestral home of Harry's fugitive godfather, Sirius Black. With Sirius still on the run, it was easy enough for Albus Dumbledore to lay claim to the property and move in. Many of the mansions massive rooms were sealed, as they had been some fourteen years ago when the Ministry had sealed the house and deposited Sirius Black in Azkaban.

The front door opened in to a long hallway lit by a large chandelier and a number of lamps hanging from the wall. Nobody had gotten around to doing something about the peeling wallpaper and the hole filled worn down carpet. As had become her custom, she tripped over the troll-leg umbrella stand which caused the portrait of Walburga Black to awaken from its slumber and scream its usual list of insults including the one "stains of dishonor, filthy half breeds, blood traitors, children of filth!"

A wave of her wand and a shower of sparks closed the curtains, effectively muffling but not silencing the portrait's incessant screaming. Tonks noted that the dining room was still sealed and

that nobody had yet to taken down the row of shrunken house-elf heads mounted on plaques above the staircase.

Thus far, only the kitchen had received Molly Weasley's cleaning and the fireplace at one threw out a wave of comforting warmth. It was by far, the only livable room in the house, "Auror Tonks," greeted Headmaster Dumbledore, "I trust that Harry has returned safely to Privet Drive?" Behind him, Molly frowned at the mention of the muggles Harry was forced to spend his holidays with, and that frown deepened when Tonks shook her head.

"He didn't even leave the station with them," she said, "I lost him outside King's Cross. He summoned the knight bus and I have no idea where he went. Mad Eye's still keeping number 4 under surveillance but I don't think he's going there." She collapsed in to a chair across from the headmaster, "There was a report from Tom at the Leaky Cauldron about someone who could have been Harry. I managed to sneak a look at the boy. Wasn't Harry." She shrugged.

This did not bode well at all. The past year had not gone well for Albus Dumbledore. Nearly everything he had worked towards had been undone, and now he had not only lost sight of Sirius Black completely but also somehow, lost Harry Potter! The headmaster shook his head, and composed his thoughts, "Has he been in touch with any of his friends by Owl?"

"A bit early in the summer for that," muttered Alastor "Mad Eye" Moony as he stomped his way in to the kitchen, bringing with him a draught of cool summer air. The one legged Auror carried the smell of freshly cut grass and mud, "School's been out for barely a day. The Dursley's have gone to bed," he explained, "Boy's not going to show up there. And they don't care where Harry is." Then again the Dursley's had never cared.

"Where are you Harry?" wondered the headmaster. Knowing that he was going to have wait, and react to whatever scheme Harry had concocted. "Thank you. That will be all." The headmaster reached in to his pocket for a lemon drop and sucked on the sweet as he considered his next course of action.

"Inform every member of the Order that Harry is missing, he must be located at once!" ordered Dumbledore. Now to placate Molly Weasley...

Chapter 23

The Casualties of War

His fourth year at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and wizardry had ended in disaster for the boy-who-lived. Now, he struggled to find a way to control an entirely new set of abilities.

Though they were discussing his options, even Harry had agreed the retuning to Privet Drive was out of the question. Extreme emotion seemed to trigger whatever it was. In addition, it was not limited to fire. In the space of a few days, he had alternated between freezing, flaming, and soaking his robes. It was however, when he slept that it became, a serious problem. While clear that emotions did trigger the elemental temper tantrums, while Harry slept, his subconscious reigned free, and the nightmares shook every piece of furniture as his magic leaked out uncontrolled.

Unlike most teenagers who are angry at the world because they are teenagers. Harry James Potter had every right to be angry, to be furious, but he had no outlet for that. Three days in to his nine weeks of holidays and he barely slept. It was not the first time Marinashka had levitated the young man from his seat at the table to the bed. The room was perhaps the size of Dudley's bedrooms combined and a comfortable one. His room at the Leaky Cauldron was paid for even though he never spent a single night there.

"He sleeps at last, husband" she said quietly, "Though for how long..." she left the sentence unfinished. Invariably, within an hour, perhaps two, he would awaken screaming the name of a witch he had watched die. "Hedwig and Crookshanks are both out hunting at the moment."

"Indeed," said Griphook, as his wife sat down next to him, "Are the wards in place?"

She nodded, "Fully protected from flame, ice and water. Has any progress been made to find someone who can help him control his ability?"

"With what knowledge we have, I am uncertain how to proceed," said Griphook, "The Council... has given me the authority to aid Mr.

... Harry and thus far, there is little that Goblin kind can do: We do not possess the necessary knowledge of wand lore

"So our apothecaries were correct?" she asked, his silence was telling, but she pressed for an answer, "Their diagnosis is accurate?"

He hesitated wondering how much he should tell her, even if she was his wife and an employee of Gringotts. These matters went beyond the Gringotts Code, "Yes. The fragments of his wand of holly and phoenix feather that are in his flesh allow for his magic, to leak though. The fragments of the wand still channel magic but without the wand to act as a focus, the magic itself emerges in its primal elemental form, without being shaped in to an actual spell."

"He will be able to cast magic wandlessly if he desired," she said, linking the pieces together, "But it is not a matter of power, or use, is it?"

"It is about control," said Harry as he walked in to the living room. Sleep had come but only for a few minutes.

Both Goblins looked around as Harry bowed slightly and sat down in a single armchair, "I apologize Harry, for discussing your, situation..."

He waved the apology aside, "Griphook, after everything you did, and you have done and still do, it is of no consequence between us." He gave Marinashka a warm smile, making it clear that "us" included all three of them, one cat curled up on a chair and on owl.

While the Goblins have mining operations scattered across Great Britain and the Headquarters of the Bank was in Diagon Alley, the Goblins did not actually live there. Their homes were a series of warrens carved in to the undersides of many of the countries mountain range and hills that included the Cairngorms and Southern Uplands of Scotland, to the Clwydian Hills and Rhinogs of Wales to England's own Dartmoor and Pennines. He wasn't exactly sure where he was, but with the floo, the carts and at worst Portkey, he was never far away from Diagon Alley. It was not long before Harry was fast asleep yet again.

"Husband," Marinashka whispered, pointing a finger at the sleeping wizard, "I will take him upstairs." She levitated Harry who slept

deeply, without a care in the world for the moment. With one hand maintaining the levitation spell, she pushed open the door and lowered him on to the bed. For the moment, the young wizard would sleep. She knew the burden that this young man carried, and felt a flash of pity for him, "It is not right, for any child to have to be so burdened." She thought, leaving him to his less than restful slumber.

After waking up for the fourth time, Harry got out of bed and changed. His morning workout was something to do, and rather than tire him out, it seemed to wake him, give him more energy to face the day. He had made the arrangements and joined the Custodians who were also just beginning their day with their morning exercise. While fit, for a wizard, Harry knew, he would never be able to match a Goblin, any goblin's endurance and stamina. Harry ran in light workout clothing and could manage twelve kilometers on a bad day. The Goblins managed twice that in combat armor with a full equipment load, and their weapons.

They nodded to him, and he nodded in return as he fell in at the rear of the formation, matching their military 120 paces per minute run through the tunnels. It was a blend of up and down, twists and turns but Harry knew the path well enough that when he came to a halt after seven kilometers, he could navigate the return path by himself. He arrived back at Griphook's home and disappeared upstairs to clean up. Breakfast was always a quiet affair. Harry had quickly learned that Goblins were not an "early morning" race.

He spent his days training, honing his magical abilities keeping up with his spellwork, and struggled to teach himself the necessary control with the aid of a number of Goblin specialists such as Geomancers who could control shape and twist soil and stone to their bidding. Chronomagi that could control the movement of time in the space around them, stretching out seconds so that they seemed to last for minutes and then reverse that with equal ease. The Headhunters could bend magic to cloak themselves in a near impenetrable blanket of invisibility.

Each of these specialist castes, employed different means to control their magical abilities. For some it was in the mind, for others focusing aids, such as staves, staffs, crystals, amulets or rings.

Even if he could not channel the magic, at least he could prevent temper related outbursts fairly well. However, to put the next phase

of his plan in to action, he was going to need to learn a number of different things. High on that list would be something, anything to counter Dumbledore's ability to poke around in his mind. He would need to have some protection in place before September 1st.

It was something extra and Harry had agreed to pay the necessary fees to learn the skill. Considering what he wanted and the time available, Harry had opted for the crash course that gave him a splitting headache after every session, but worked. "Consider your mind akin to a library, but a disorganized one," explained Marinshaka, "Every memory is like a book. Each book has pages, of details, of information. Before you can properly defend your mind, you must first organize your mind. Organize Everything."

Harry spent hours, creating virtual bookshelves for all of the books. And it saddened him, greatly when he realized that the memories of loss, pain and hurt outnumbered those of happiness. Privet Drive was nothing but years of agony that he had to relive from the age of four. The first memory of his life was of skinning both his knees, tripping on the driveway of number 4, limping inside and being yelled at for dripping blood on the carpet. That was his first active memory, but he went further back through the memories of his life as an infant, those few he could recall one stood out: The night his parents died.

It was hard - but he could recall it, almost all of it. Everything that happened that night, from the splintering of the front door, through to his mother's sacrifice to save him.

...one of Aunt Marge's vicious bulldogs snarling snapping at his ankles, forcing him to clamber up a tree in the back garden, while the four of them stood and laughed at him...

...the insinuations that his mother and father were nothing. Worthless. Failures. That he should have died or drowned as a "pup..."

...Uncle Vernon, screaming mad because Harry didn't mow the lawn in straight enough lines as a 6 year old, slapping him across the face repeatedly...

...Aunt Petunia whipping him with a belt for burning a pot-roast at the age of seven...

...Harry lying in bed starving, waiting for the can of cold soup to come through the cat flap in his door for the first three summers of his life at Hogwarts...

....Dudley and his gang administering yet another beating, this time in the front garden, in broad daylight. His uncle yelling about Harry's blood splattering the car.....

...Snape dropping a well-made potion on the dungeon floor when Harry had already cleaned his cauldron...

Privet Drive was easy enough but when he came to the memories of the past year, the memories of four hours of hell, took him almost a week to live through again, as he relived the source of all his nightmares. Griphook's wife was adept enough at what the Goblins termed "the mind arts," that encompassed everything from divination, to Legillimency, and Occulumenty. She was a patient teacher, taking the time, just sitting there as Harry went through it all; offer an ear to listen or silent support when he needed.

The mental library organized, she demonstrated the possible methods of attack, cautioning that these were the common approaches. They ranged from the subtlest of feather light probes to battering ram like assaults and pinpoint surgical attacks.

She guided and he absorbed everything. She demonstrated how to build defenses that ranged from mundane walls to traps and before long Harry had grasped a key concept that had to be discovered and experienced, by anyone who studied the mind arts from the Goblins. The mind was a place, as real as any other was. Each wizard could access their mind, walk through it, touch and feel its contents, every memory, every feeling, and experience.

She gave one of her rare smiles, taking pride in what he had accomplished in the span of two weeks. It took many of her kind several months to match his achievements. However, what made the most noticeable difference was that he could sleep. He slept deeply for the first few nights after achieving the breakthrough. "I can sleep; I don't have nightmares, because my mind is a different place. I'm asleep and know it, and I'm still in control of it." It had also cut down on the number of nocturnal blasts of magic.

He had the basics mastered, but his mental defenses would only grow stronger with time, and use of the skill, "Like a muscle Harry, you must use it constantly to build up its strength and endurance." She offered him a slightly evil grin, "There will come a time, when defensive measures alone will not suffice. You must learn to attack and invade." In a word: Legilimency.

She taught, he learned and they dueled with their minds. Invariably, Harry lost but with every defeat, he learned something, and applied it. He had, perhaps the greatest motivation in the world for someone his age: Revenge. Marinashka could see it clearly. Revenge drove the young man forward. It would make him the greatest wizard of his generation. However, would he be remembered or reviled... that remained to be seen.

Though the wizard and goblin seemed to be staring at each other across the table, the mental war, raged. They struck out with mental attacks that rebounded off shields, were misdirected, fed false memories, used as lines of counter attack. Their mental duels took place every night and it was the end of July when Harry finally succeeded, withstanding her assault but also expelling her from his mind. He hesitated and she counterattacked, slamming in to the outer walls like a battering ram. Unprepared for the assault, she breached the first layer only to find his secondary line of defenses. She switched her pattern of attack opting for a needle like probe, in search of a pre agreed upon memory. The needle was swallowed completely by an inky blackness as he countered the thrust.

She shattered the probe in to a thousand of microscopic fibers and slipped through the mental net and upon finding the second wall, penetrated through the cracks. Inside his memories, she suddenly realized that the arrangement was different. Where there had been shelves with books, there were a collection of trunks. Her hesitation proved her undoing as something swept up every fiber of her probe, and bound them together. There was a snarl of rage that echoed and the probe, and with it, her consciousness was dragged, within Harry's mind, to a trunk, that was different from the rest. Others looked normal, as if made of wood. This one was made of cold cast steel. It was a prison, in his mind, she realized.

She winced in pain at the forceful expulsion but launched another attack. Only to find that in those few moments, he had rebuilt his defenses, and allowed them to change to a completely different form.

This was unexpected. Moreover, she ended the duel. "You've been studying on your own Harry?" she took a long drink from the glass before her.

He nodded, "I thought about what you said, about how having the same kind of defense leaves you vulnerable to probes of a specific type," he drained his glass and refilled it, "Vary defenses for varying types of attack."

"And the reconfiguration of you memories?" she asked.

"Same principle: You broke in before and knew what to expect. By changing the... storage system, I buy myself time through distraction to counterattack."

She studied him, carefully, "What was that steel trunk?"

His smile had been one of gentle pride, satisfaction in his accomplishments, "That is a place, for my enemies." The smile took on a dark edge, "Those memories, are the stuff of nightmares, the stuff my nightmares are made of."

She realized what had nearly happened in their mock duel a few minutes before, "I must caution you, Harry," she said gently, "Do not become what it is you fight against. I never knew Hermione Jane Granger, but from what you have spoken of her, from what my husband has told me about her, she meant everything to you. Do not... disappoint her." She set her glass on the table, "Now then, Harry," she wore the same grin that Griphook wore at the outset of a duel, "I challenge you to a rematch!"

Later that night, Harry was fast asleep, and the Goblin couple stayed up to discuss their young charge. The Goblins treated him as an adult, because under their laws he was an adult: The last male in his family line. Moreover, as such, they sought to advise him, not dictate to him, "A month, and his only contact with the outside world has been via Owl and Fire sprite." She shook her head, "He should venture beyond our warrens."

Griphook disagreed, "He is still...fragile... is not the correct word. Hermione's death has repercussions beyond imagining. The wand he now uses was her wand. Though not taken in battle, it serves him still. Although he has control of his own mental defenses and that

has enhanced his memory recall, emotional outbursts like his could burn down any free standing structure in Diagon Alley."

She opened her mouth to object, and he held up a hand to forestall her, "I will not forbid him, nor will I share my opinion unless he asks for it, as it has always been."

"Griphook Thazdom," she ran a hand playfully through his hair, "If I did not know you better, I would say that you have feelings of... affection for this wizard." The hint of a smirk played across her lips, "What would the warriors of the Bha-zhak Kha-dorath think?"

He smirked back at her, "They would think precisely what I tell them to think." She laughed at his reply, "Being Commander of the Bha-zhak Kha-dorath, has its benefits after all."

In a manor house on the edge of a small village, the Dark Lord of Death Eaters sat and surveyed what he would soon be the undisputed master and ruler of: The United Kingdom. However, before he could become the ruler, he would first have to crush all resistance. Voldemort knew, full well that Harry Potter would oppose him. Revenge was a simple yet comprehensible motivation. No doubt, the bumbling old fool, Albus Dumbledore would have reactivated the Order of the Phoenix to counter his death eaters.

Dumbledore and his Order aside, Voldemorts primary objective for the near future was to gain sufficient knowledge to defeat his foes once and for all. However, to gain that knowledge, he would first need to locate Harry Potter. Wormtail entered what was once the dining hall of the manor house, and dropped to one knee, "My Lord," he said, "Your Death Eaters are gathered as you requested."

Wormtail rose smoothly as Voldemort stalked past him in to what was a large conference room, around which the Inner Circle sat. The glasses were filled with wine but untouched. The Dark Lord seated himself and the gathering of hooded men with snake like eyes slit masks bowed as one, and took their seats. As was their custom and tradition from before the First War, they unmasked themselves and waited. Voldemort, picked up his glass, by the stem, and swirled the blood red wine experimentally, "Where is he?" hissed Voldemort without preamble. Only silence greeted him, "My Death Eaters, where is Harry, Potter?"

Lucius Malfoy was first to speak, "My Lord, Draco confirms that Harry departed Hogwarts for the summer holidays as usual and was seen in the station."

Severus picked up the tale, "He was also spotted in the station by members of the Order of the Phoenix but gave them the slip. He has not been seen since..." Both men went rigid in their chairs as the Cruciatus Curse sent knives of burning agony shooting through every nerve in their respective bodies.

"I know this! Fools! What I want to know is where he has been for the past month!" snarled the Dark Lord as he slapped his glass down, the stem shattering as wine spilled across the table like blood.

"My lord, if I may?" said Pettigrew quietly, "Perhaps, we can draw him out of hiding..." Voldemort turned to face Pettigrew, not bothering to release the men currently doing their best to resist screaming under the curse with varying degrees of success.

"Speak Pettigrew," he finally released them, and both Lucius and Severus slumped over in the chairs, gasping for breath.

"Harry has a number of friends," said Pettigrew, "The Longbottom boy, a number of the Weasley children, Lovegood's daughter, and Colin Creevy. An attack upon one of them, or perhaps several of them, could draw the boy out of hiding." Wormtail paused, "If my Lord deems it reasonable, Victor Krum and Fleur Delacour could also be viable targets."

"An interesting proposition, Wormtail," muttered Voldemort as he stroked Nagini's head with his free hand, his yew and phoenix feather wand rolling idly between his fingers, "Do you have anything more specific?" The rat-faced man nodded, "Continue."

"I personally believe that targeting neither Victor Krum nor Fleur Delacour would not succeed, and it would draw international attention to our activities. The ideal targets would be the former members of his tournament 'Honor Guard,'" Wormtail spat the words, "The ideal target would be the muggle born Creevy. Only the children would be able to defend their parents. As targets, they would also have the added advantage of sowing the seeds of chaos and terror...."

"An interesting proposition Wormtail. I shall give it due consideration," said Voldemort, "Leave!" he snapped and the Death Eaters filled out of the room, many walking to the fireplace to Floo back to the only fireplace that connected Riddle Manor to Diagon Alley. Others opted to walk out the front door and past the wards before apparating.

Wormtail waited, knowing what was coming. It had been this way since his master's resurrection. He clenched his silver hand and the summons came as he expected. He entered the conference room and took his regular seat, two seats down, on the left hand side of the table. "Your proposition has merit," said Voldemort, "How are the new recruits coming in their training?" Twelve men and women would hardly be enough to conquer Wizarding Britain, let alone the rest of the country.

"Not well," he answered truthfully, "The process is complicated due to its muggle science origins. We lack the proper knowledge of their science, and..." he hesitated, choosing his words with care, "the magic required is arcane. Little more than myths and unsubstantiated rumors remain. I cannot provide any guarantees."

Voldemort's wand rolled between his fingers, "We have no choice but to proceed as planned, then. Take yourself and two others - Nott and Mulciber," he decided, "The three of you should be enough to handle two teenage wizards."

"It will be as you desire, My Lord," He rose and left the conference room. Voldemort stroked Nagini's head, as she hissed to her companion, "Soon, Nagini. We cannot act prematurely. First, we must have the prophecy. Then with my army, we can bend this country to our will."

That evening in Maid Vale, it was just before supper when the Warrick Avenue Tube Station was the site of a number of crackling pops. Three wizards, robed in black with masks and hoods apparated in to existence and made their leisurely way along Castellian Avenue to Number 17.

"Wards!" Anti apparition wards, anti-portkey wards, silencing charms, notice-me-not charms, privacy charms and muggle repelling charms all went up around the house, and to the rest of the neighborhood, the house simply ceased to be there. "Remember to make the filth

suffer," ordered Peter. Peter himself, stood watch outside as Nott and Mulciber got down to doing, what it is Death Eaters do so well.

Upon bursting in through the front door, the spell fire had been fast, and one-way. Dennis Creevy had heard of his brother's rock and roll year as one of Harry's friends and was thankful that his brother was not at home. The bone breaker curse took his father in the chest, slamming him in to the far wall. The Cutting Curse drew his mother's blood as she collapsed to the floor with barely a sound. Dennis's wand was on his bedside table where he had left it and the curse, felt like a rapid string of punches to the face and gut that dropped him to his knees.

Mulciber gave the three "a taste" of the Cruciatus curse and then mockingly, asked Dennis to choose, who died first. Gryffindor for nothing, he glared up at the killers, hocked up and spat a globule of bloody phlegm, right in to the masked man's face, "Harry will get you, he will. So just get on with it!" The boy did the same only to stain Nott's robes instead of his mask.

The Death Eater snarled in anger, and backhanded the boy across the face, and turned his attention to the incapacitated adults, "Your mother'll be dead soon enough boy." It was true, her blood had already soaked and stained the carpet red, "But I can help your father along... Avada Kedevra!"

The young man's last thoughts were of his brother, over at a friend's house for dinner. A muggle friend who had never heard of Hogwarts, who thought that magic was just misdirection and illusion. His courage stood him in good stead. "Senium Viscus!" cast Mulciber with a grin, "Avada Kedevra is too good for you boy,"

Pain, ate its way up Dennis's chest, and he looked down through eyes swimming with tears of agony, "Go ahead and scream, no one can hear you." The boy bit his lip and drew blood. He refused, and within a minute, the pain began to fade, as did consciousness, as he slumped over dead, "The Decay Curse," Mulciber kicked the corpse over, still too good a death for filth like this."

Pettigrew pushed himself off the low iron fence and went inside. They dismantled the wards from within the dwelling, "Mordsmorde!" shouted Pettigrew. Moments later, the three vanished with the

distinctive crack of apparition to different destinations, until their master called upon them once again.

The muggle police were quick to respond to the phone call from fourteen-year-old Colin Creevey, who has just returned from dinner with a childhood friend, to find his family butchered, the Dark Mark floating gently in the sky over his home.

The Ministry was quick to react when they heard about it, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement dispatch three separate squads: One of Aurors to contain the scene disguised as muggle policemen, a team of Hit Wizards who withdrew from the scene once it became clear there was nothing they could do, and the Obliviators to conduct damage control via muggle memory modification.

Mordicus Egg had written, in 1963 that muggles are capable of ignoring, justifying and explaining any magical happening given that they refused to believe in magic. It was why the flimsiest of excuses often sufficed to cover up the darker truths. That and given the purpose of the Muggle-Worthy Excuses Committee had thought up dozens of possible explanations and cover ups to explain all manner of magical happenings, whether good or ill.

Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones shook her head sadly. There had been reports that Voldemort was back, and then the Prophets reports to the contrary. No longer protected by his confidentiality agreement with the Quibbler, the Prophet had reactivated its usual strategy and had worked its way up, from general questions to specific accusations and slander against Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore. Amelia Bones realized that she would need to find the young man a temporary guardian, until permanent arrangements were made. The question however, was who?

In Riddle Manor, Nott and Mulciber screamed in agony as Voldemort unleashed some anger and frustration at the simple plan that had gone wrong, "Incompetent! Fools! I sent you out to kill four! And you return having only killed three!" hissed Voldemort, "And where is Pettigrew? You could not even see to his return to share in your pain? Foolishness beyond incompetent!"

"My Lord," Voldemort turned to find Pettigrew standing before him, "I..." the curse slammed him to the worn stone floor of the manor,

and he screamed. Much to the still twitching forms of Nott and Mulciber, but even between bouts of pain, the animagus was able to plead forgiveness, "not lost...Privet Drive... lead us to Potter..." whatever he was going to say was drowned up by his screams of agony as Voldemort poured even more power in to the curse.

"You failed me! Yet again! You fail me Wormtail!" snarled the Dark Lord of the Death Eaters, "Mulciber, Nott, enjoy yourselves... make him feel my wrath!" The pair rose unsteadily to their feet, trembling as they bowed. From his fetal position on the floor, only he could see the feral grins on the faces of both men, and he quivered in fear, "Just ensure that you do not damage him... permanently." The aftermath of the curse had him trembling, and if he could have whimpered in fear, he would have.

Chapter 24

Not the best of Birthdays

The Goblin's may be the nation that keeps the wheels of the wizarding economy turning, and to do so, they are constantly on the alert for any news worthy of note. The slaying of a family with muggle born wizards easily qualifies as such news

A goblin saying reads, "Good news, travels at the speed of sound. Bad news, travels at the speed of light." Such as it was, bad news did not arrive until a little after five in the morning the following day. The messenger woke everyone in Griphook's home when she practically unhinged the door with her urgent knocking, "Blahar Griphook, Mr. Potter, I bring... unwelcome news." The messenger handed the report. It was in many ways a form document that Aurors have filled out for centuries to report and record such incidents, including the official aftermath.

Declining to read over Griphook's shoulder, the wizard cast a duplication charm and stood up to read. He barely got halfway through before the paper crumbled to ash as his emotions took control of him; "Shit!" he stared at the glowing ball of flame in his hand, and blinked, "Shit! Take cover!"

Considering his generous height advantage over everyone else present, Harry aimed his outstretched arm up high. The lance of flame leapt from his wand arm with a scream. It arched up and slammed in to the roof some thirty odd feet overhead. The goblin enchantment held against the flaming assault with childish ease. Everyone else however, looked at Harry with varying degrees of amusement, "Take cover eh Harry?" said Marinashka.

"Sorry about that," he sheepishly ran a hand through his hair, "Maybe we should set up a fund so that you can repair whatever I break, blow up, freeze or melt next?" There was a chuckle or two before the levity of the moment collapsed under the weight of what the report had said.

"Is there anything we can do?" wondered Harry, then recalled something he could do, "Griphook, get in touch with Amelia Bones. Arrange a meeting with her within Gringotts." he glanced at his charmed and protected wristwatch, "Today if you can."

"What are you planning Harry?" asked Griphook.

"Dumbledore, has done nothing to prevent this," growled Harry, "I... should have seen this coming. Voldemort wants me dead, and, this means he'll do whatever he has to." Something occurred to Harry: The Date. "That sonofabitch, has a nasty sense of timing, a sick sense of humor, or more than likely a mix of both," thought Harry. They were four hours in to July 31, 1995, "Lousy way to start a birthday," muttered Harry.

"Senior Accounts Manager Griphook of Gringotts," Griphook blinked for a moment, "We have financial matters to discuss," Harry remembered the last time formality had stood between him and Griphook. It felt like two, three lifetimes ago. In truth, it had been less than a year. Less than nine months for that, but he had promised her. He would keep that promise, "Regarding the Potter Family Vault, amongst other things."

"Very well Mr. Potter," replied Griphook formally, "I shall await you in my office at nine o'clock this morning."

Harry nodded, "See if you can get Mrs. Bones, and Colin Creevey to attend as well." Griphook nodded, "And since we're all already up... does anyone feel like a cup of tea?"

The early morning hours passed quickly, and following Harry's regular routine. Doing stuff, doing anything, made the pain manageable. He was sleeping, more or less regularly, had some mastery of Occulemency and Legillimency, enough he hoped to give the headmaster Dumbledore a run for his money.

When Harry stepped out of the fireplace, he realized his mistake. He had said his destination to be "Gringotts London," instead of specifying that he wanted a specific office. He rolled out, and somewhat half stood and half twisted, landing on the floor, staring at a pair of female boots. He looked up and blinked in surprise, "Fleur?"

"Harry Potter, at my feet," she chuckled, "I always wondered what it would be like having you worship the ground I walked on..." her English had improved a great deal, but she still spoke with that

slightly French accent, the melodic lit or something. She helped him to his feet, "Business or pleasure?"

"In Gringotts?" he smirked, and winked, "It's always business."

Fleur Isabelle Delacour, Part Veela, French, Beauxbatons graduate, Class of 1995, and still the same stunning woman. "Perhaps I can be of assistance then, Mr. Potter." She gestured to the central hall of the bank where a number of Goblins were seated, awaiting the days customers, "Welcome to Gringotts, Diagon Alley. How may I be of assistance?"

Then it struck him, what was different. He had always been a little guarded around her, because of that Veela allure, charm, whatever you care to call it. But he realized that his basic occulemency shields were enough to at least, temporarily neutralize its effects, leaving him as clear headed as usual, "I have an appointment with Senior Accounts Manager Griphook," Harry glanced at his watch, "scheduled for nine o'clock. I'm five minutes early."

"This way sir," she led him through a set of double doors, to one side of the hall.

He paused as they were about to pass through the doors, "Blahgrast Diedom Heartfang," he greeted the other Goblin as well. Both were on duty and could not speak to him but they saluted him, clenched fist crossing over their chest and bowed ever so slightly. He returned the gesture, bowing slightly more than they had, before continuing on their way.

"If I did not know better Harry," and she didn't, "I would say that you have been spending far too much time around the Goblins, learning to speak their language...." To Harry it seemed like she was on a fishing expedition, but then again, this was Fleur. He had saved her life and her sisters during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. There was something of a life debt there, Harry realized, similar to the bond between him and Ginny Weasley.

"Being friends with Griphook means that I should learn at least the basics of his culture," Harry explained, "After all, I don't want to be like Hagrid. I'm sure you heard about his atrocious French... bong-sewer as opposed to bon soire..." she chuckled and Harry felt the slight tap against his mental shields. She was not doing it

deliberately. It was just the way Veela, even part Veela are. They give off that positive vibe with a hint of "come hither" to it.

She led the way confidently through the warren of passages to the outer door of Griphook's office. The guards on either side of the door nodded and Fleur opened the door for him, "Got that internship eh?" she smiled, "Free for coffee later? I'd love to hear how you wound up back in London. I can pick you up at about four?"

She smiled, "I'd like that," she hesitated, "But only if you tell me how you are doing." She had not asked him, at least not directly. His friends had tried to ask him, to get him to open up and talk about it. They knew he'd held back, from all of them what had happened, and some of them, got the hint a little better than others.

The Weasely twins had asked him, gotten the hint and left it alone. Ginny, had not caught on and still wrote, once a week, asking, almost begging him to talk to her about it. Neville and Luna had only mentioned that they were free to talk, listen, and he had promised to take them up on it sometime... they could unfortunately relate to his loss better than anyone else. Luna... Luna... he snapped back to the moment, "You'll have to do the same," he cautioned, "Have you managed to get today's newspapers?"

She shook her head, "Non, why?"

"Check... the obituaries..." he said, "Colin's family... they were killed last night."

Fleur paled. Harry's friends had seen to it, after something of a rocky start, that she had enjoyed her time at Hogwarts, and could take a certain amount of pride in calling his friends, hers as well, "Colin?"

"Survived... he wasn't there, at a friend's house according to the Auror's report," Harry said quietly, "Four o'clock then?"

She nodded, "In front of the bank."

He smiled, "I'll be waiting." The smile vanished as he entered Griphook's office. They got the formalities out of the way, and relapsed in to their friendly, more personal demeanors, "I'm sorry about this morning, Griphook, but..."

"Formality probably saved me from having to replace a wall or two in my home," said Griphook, "I also heard that you challenged two of the Custodians to a duel, and fought them to a draw. Not the first either."

"Needed to vent a little... a lot," He replied, helping himself to the ever present tea, and cookies, "You recall the first time I was in your office with, Hermione... I think, it's time that I access my family vault."

Griphook put down his cup, "I suspected as much," they walked to the carts and took off at high speed through the twisting maze of tunnels, before coming to a stop before a vault that Harry had seen only once in his life but never entered, "Your blood is already here. Merely press your thumb and it will open.

The vault was old - ancient even given that it had a double-digit number instead of the more common three or four digits. However, the contents, he had only seen in passing once before when his blood had reactivated the blood wards. Harry quickly realized that the space was bigger on the inside that it should have been - a popular trick that allowed the Goblins to get more vaults in to the same amount of space - lights flared to life along the breadth and depth of the family vault.

There was furniture, suits of armor, shelves lining the walls filled with tomes of encyclopedic knowledge. There was a display case of wands, numerous wands, all that and then, there was the money: Towering piles of gold disappeared behind one another, rising in perfect symmetry, "Each single stack measures precisely 32 feet and ten inches, or 1000 Galleons," explained Griphook, "Ten rows wide, Ten rows deep to a pallet equals 100,000 Galleons." Scattered throughout were gemstones of all kinds: Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, magical stones, shining in the light reflected in Harry's wide-eyed stare. "At present, the contents of this vault including artifacts, armor, gemstones and properties amount to precisely 141.3 million Galleons, 72 Sickles, and 3 Knuts."

Last night, Voldemort had fired the opening salvo in the war to come. However, Harry knew he faced an uphill battle: It was not just Voldemort and the Death Eaters. He had been following the news. Moreover, the news was that Harry Potter and Dumbledore were both crackpot lunatics: The public, the wizarding press, the ministry

of magic were as much his enemies as Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Arguably, he could put Dumbledore in the "neither friend nor foe" category, along with the Order of the Phoenix. That left him, to fight the war on his own. "Least I've got the money to finance a couple of small wars."

"Enough to finance a muggle Third World War and then help rebuild the world in the aftermath of it," said Griphook, "Not a suggestion mind you," he said drily. "I have made arrangements," the goblin pulled a rectangular piece of plastic from a pouch, "It is the equivalent of a muggle credit card, only tied to your vaults for your transactions in the muggle world." He handed a small pouch to Harry, "The money bag is also tied directly to your vaults, and if you will allow me," the Goblin drew a small blade, "A drop of blood will key it so that you and those you allow can draw funds through this bag, for whatever you have planned."

Harry held out his hand and Griphook nicked the tip of his finger and squeezed blood on to the edge of the bag. It glowed a sapphire blue and Harry attached it to his belt. "Yeah. Well, I've got plans of my own.... But we need to sort out Colin's situation first."

Their return trip by cart was quick and they arrived in Griphook's office to find Amelia Bones already seated and awaiting them. "Mrs. Bones, thank you for meeting me on such short notice," said Harry.

She studied him for a long moment and noticed that he had aged a great deal since she had last seen him. The last time they had met was an interesting evening, one of excellent food and drink where the conversation had only been surpassed by the quality of the company she had kept that evening, "Harry," she said, "You've caused a lot of people to worry, and panic with your vanishing act. I believe I'm the first witch to have lain eyes on you in about five weeks."

Harry said nothing about that: his disappearance, "Technically, you'd be the second," he said with a half smile. His vanishing act had been noted by the major publications and only his friends knew that he was alive. He had used the Goblin Fire Sprites to handle his correspondences, making it next to impossible to confirm his location, even if the Sprites screamed that he was hiding in Gringotts. Gringotts, was after all, a Goblin city that went for miles underground in every direction, "Somewhere between the words

"lunatic," "Crackpot," "disturbed," and "dangerous" the Prophet did mention I was missing," said Harry, "My personal favorite was Rita Skeeter's rumor that I had checked myself in to St. Mungo's for shock therapy. How's Colin?" he asked abruptly.

The sudden change in topic might have derailed some but the director of magical law enforcement took it in stride, "Not well, all things considered," she replied, "Now I understand you arranged this meeting, to what end?"

Harry was blunt, "War is coming, Director Bones, and I want to know: What is the ministry doing to prepare?" Her silence spoke volumes, "Playing directly in to Voldemort's hands." He shook his head, "What is it going to take for you people to act?" snarled Harry, "A home invasion robbery gone horribly wrong? What could possibly be "right" about such a thing?"

"Blunt honesty," said the director, "I can appreciate that. So I feel that I can be as candid with you as you are with me: Where is the proof? Dumbledore's word counted for something, once, but not anymore. Despite your status as the "Chosen One," you are a relatively unknown, even after the Triwizard Tournament. It comes down to one thing: Where is the proof?" she held up her hands in a placating gesture, "Last night's attack only proves that the Death Eaters who went free are up to their old habits. But there have been attacks like this for years," she emphasized, "Years. Since the fall of Voldemort. Every few years a number of muggles are killed, muggle borns are targeted, and the Dark Mark appears over the scene of the crime."

"So you people say "horrible tragedy" and move on. You want proof. I'll give you proof! Griphook! A pensieve!" Normal memories are a silvery grey metallic in color. What Harry pulled from his temple was red with silvery streaks. It struck the surface of the pensieve and immediately the normally placid surface began to roil, "Have a look in there! Have a look! If you dare! Your proof!" he spat.

She hesitated for an instant and then entered the memory.

When she emerged, she looked at Harry, with a new something. It was not respect. It was something else entirely, almost like fear, "He, really has risen from the grave..." she whispered.

Harry laughed bitterly, "Took the deaths of a pure blood, two muggle borns and two muggles to convince you did it? So what is the Ministry doing to prepare besides nothing?"

"Minister Fudge has hamstrung the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Our numbers have been in decline for the past few years, and there is no money in the budget, especially in the middle of the year. And what I saw may be proof enough for me," she hesitated, "But the ministry won't take kindly to this," she warned, "and as a ministry official... I can tell you, you face an uphill battle, if you try to convince them. Even a memory in Pensieve won't be enough, not with the media against you as well."

"I don't intend to convince them," was his blunt reply, "During the first war, the Order of the Phoenix fought against Voldemort, but I've studied the history. They did not fight. They remained passive. They reacted. The Ministry was essentially doing the same. It took an infant, to win your war. Now children will have to win it for you, again. But before we get to that, I want two things done for Colin..."

Colin's situation was more than unique: His parents were both muggle orphans. So there really was no family for him to go to. Harry had secured two things for his young friend: The first was that Colin would return to Hogwarts to continue his education. The second was that as long as all parties were agreeable, Colin would have a place to stay for the last month of the summer, with Luna and her father.

"So we are agreed?" asked Harry. She nodded "Good. Thank you for your time Director."

The door closed behind her and Griphook turned to Harry, "What are you planning Harry?"

"A lot," he answered, "For the moment, I want everything, my family vault and trust vault merged. Then I want... eighteen vaults created, each one to receive a deposit of five million galleons. As an account is drained, it is to be restored to its opening balance." Griphook nodded, "Next, I need a real estate agent. Then lawyers," Harry glanced at his watch, "well... the lawyers, after lunch." It was almost noon.

Harry spent only a half hour with the goblin property agent, outlining the specific details of a property: Large, 400 square meters spread over two floors in an exclusive neighborhood, somewhere in or around London, price up to three million galleons or the equivalent in Pounds. The second property was for him, and he wanted something large and relatively isolated from wizards and muggles. two stories, maybe three, extensive basement, swimming pool out back, with expansive grounds for at least a kilometer in every direction.

Lunch was a quiet affair for Harry as he picked at his plate, more due to his wandering rambling thoughts than anything else. In the afternoon, he was surprised to see Marinashka, leading a trio of goblins in to the conference room, "Mr. Potter, I understand you wanted lawyers," he nodded, "I am Marinashka, these are my associates Selim and Thera." The goblins bowed at the introduction and Harry took care to return the greeting, "How may we be of service?"

"Two things but most importantly: I want to open a case file on Albus Dumbledore." Harry said, and it stopped all three goblins in their tracks."A pensieve would be useful, so you can see for yourself." The artifact was brought in and within minutes, the Goblin's were watching video gold about the Albus Dumbledore the wizard who had meddled with Harry's life since he was born. They saw his treatment at the hands of the Dursleys. The events of the past year were most damning of all. The illegal use of Legillimency was only one thing and then, they watched the rebirth of Voldemort and the revelation of the charms and curses that he had used on Hermione.

Harry had braced himself for the emotional wrench, but the table grew warm beneath his grip. Only a mental slap on the wrist from Marinashka kept the table from bursting in to flame. By the time, they had finished viewing everything the goblins knew that they had enough to build a solid case against the Headmaster of Hogwarts, "Multiple counts of unwanted mental intrusion, possibly mind rape. Endangerment of children is a given. Given who and what he has hired as a Defense Professor, and Severus Snape means we can add incompetence and dereliction in his duties as headmaster. You have enough here to get him sacked as headmaster of Hogwarts, impeached as Chief of the Wizengamot, and to generally make his life very uncomfortable, for a very long time. Do you intend to press charges Mr. Potter?"

"Not yet," said the grinning teenager, "How does an underage wizard, go about petitioning the ministry for full emancipation?" That was the final piece of the puzzle, and it all fell in to place for Harry's legal team.

"Headmaster Dumbledore will not sign off on any documentation such as this," said Marinashka, and then she grinned, "You intend to force him to sign off, don't you?"

"Call a spade a spade," countered Harry, "I'm going to blackmail him and I'll happily bury him if he doesn't and then get what I want anyway."

"You play a dangerous game Harry," cautioned Marinashka, "I heard that you met with the Director of Magical Law Enforcement. I echo my husband's curiosity when I ask: What are you planning?"

Harry sighed, knowing that he would have to answer that question eventually, he glanced at his watch and noticed the time, and "War is coming. The Ministry buries its collective head in the sand or up its ass... The Order of the Phoenix is a reactive force, not a proactive one. He hasn't revealed himself yet, but he will. And when he does, I want to be ready."

"You've done a Dumbledore, Harry," said his lawyer, "You've given nothing but vague generalities and even when you do answer the question, you answer in general vagueness."

"I learned," he deadpanned, "from the best." Another glance at his watch, "I presume you don't need me hanging around to complete the paperwork?"

"We can complete the administrative paperwork. I presume you'll want to move ahead as soon as possible?"

Harry shook his head, "In a day or two, I have some post to deal with, and a friend to catch up with in the next few hours." It was true that Harry had been in touch with all of his friends since the summer holidays began, but he had not disclosed his location to any of them, "Constant Vigilance!" the grizzled, veteran Auror was right about more than a couple of things.

The presents were varied and thoughtful but he kept his thank you brief and to the point, as he opened the simple gifts. Unsurprisingly, there was nothing from Ron. However, what hurt was that he kept expecting to see another letter, another package, another something. He shook his head, grit his teeth and bit back the tears, "She's gone! She is Gone! She! Is! Gone!" he told himself, he knew it was true, but it did not make it any easier to bear. He rubbed eyes, and changed. He had an appointment with a lovely young woman he did not intend to keep waiting.

Having spent much of the past five or so weeks underground, Harry still looked like Harry instead of some sort of pasty white vampire creature. The Goblins had charmed the roofs of their underground caverns to follow a strange pattern of lightning that mimicked light and day. Harry was as tanned as he was at the end of the school year, perhaps a touch paler, but not noticeably so. "Mademoiselle Delacour, c'est un vrai plaisir... ok fine... Languages are not my strong suit." She laughed and she hugged him, giving him the traditional French greeting that Harry smoothly returned. "Coffee? Ice Cream? Or both?" he asked.

"Both," she replied.

He flicked the braid of hair behind his ear, "I hate to say this Fleur, but I can't go out there as myself..." She eyed the braid, and as everyone else who knew him, wondered what it was, what it meant.

"So you know what the media have been saying, ever since the... tournament ended..." she asked. He nodded. They both knew that the tournament had not ended, but fallen apart. He assumed the same disguise he had worn at the beginning of the summer and Fleur asked, "and who might you be sir?" she noted, still had the braid of dark brown hair.

"Just call me Harry," he said, running a hand through the rest of his silver streaked blond hair. She smiled and for the first time in a long time, Harry felt something, different. He checked his mental shields and found that they were in place. Offering her his arm, she accepted and they strode out of the bank and in to the sunlight, "So coffee and ice cream. I know just the place."

They strode down the Alley, arm in arm, chatting about everything and nothing all at once. They window-shopped stopping for a

moment at Quality Quidditch Supplies so Harry could admire the new Firebolt XL. They stopped at Scribbulus Writing Instruments to stock up when Harry noticed it: Fleur Delacour could not help who and what she was. Wherever she went, she would arouse feelings of desire and jealousy in both men and women. That and the fact that she had chosen to give some teenage boy her time and attention, no doubt surreptitiously yanked a number of chains. The stares that the pair got were a source of mild amusement for Harry, "If only they knew," he thought with a chuckle. It was not long before they arrived at their destination: Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor.

They ordered and Harry paid before they settled in to a "U" shaped booth at the back. His wand sprang from the Auror style holster on his forearm as he cast a series of charms, giving them privacy and a measure of invisibility from the wizarding public.

Conversation ranged across a variety of topic. Fleur had gotten an internship at the bank, "at the bottom of the ladder," and could work her way up if she wanted to. He gave her an edited version of his summer activities so far. However, they both knew that they were dancing around what they both really wanted to discuss. For both of them, it was a grenade with the pin already pulled. Finally, two ice creams and several cups of coffee later, she broached the topic in a deliberately round about fashion, "How have you been holding up Harry?"

"...about as well as I can expect," he said honestly, "I've been getting some sleep, more than a few hours a night the past two weeks. How about yourself?"

She shrugged, "I sleep well enough... but it's hard sometimes to..." she gestured, "carry on?" she said quietly. Harry had done his reading and research and knew that the loss of a loved one was perhaps the easiest way to send a Veela, even a part Veela on a downward spiral from which there was little chance of recovery, "some days, it is alright. I can laugh and smile, but on others..."

"You see, or feel the weight of the world come crashing down upon your shoulders?" he finished. She nodded, looking down at her feet, "You wonder why him, not you?" she nodded and looked at him, tears swimming in her eyes as a single tear rolled down her cheek. So close to her, a detached part of his mind noted that even in tears,

she looked beautiful. "If you're going to cry, cry." He said softly, "don't hold back on my account." He had not shed a tear in weeks now. They came. However, he never let them fall. There was no place in him for weakness.

She leaned against him. When they had gotten closer, he was not sure, but he did what instinct demanded of him. He did the only thing he could, and simply held her as she cried. The emotional outburst from her scratched at his mind shields but he could see the wave of misery that radiated out from her. The witches and wizards in the street suddenly stopped, as if hit with a stunner, looking around. They could feel her pain, but did not know who, what or the why associated to it.

"It gets better, Fleur," said Harry quietly, almost whispering to her, "It gets better with time." She held on to him, tightening her grip, almost as if she did not want to let go, as if scared he would disappear. "I told you once; I always have time, for friends."

What he did not have time for, was becoming anything more than friends were.

She calmed after a few minutes, and realized where she was, whom she was leaning against and how it made her feel, safe, protected, cared for. So many words describing so few feelings. Cedric had been able to do the same for her, but here it was different. She tensed slightly and she had no doubt that Harry felt it as his hold upon her slackened, ever so slightly.

She pulled away from him, "Sorry..."

"Feel better?" She nodded. He glanced at his watch... it was a little after seven in the evening, and gave her a moment to compose herself.

"Dinner," she said suddenly, "I'm having dinner. Would you care to join me?"

He smiled, "Do you have a place in mind?"

Dinner was a quiet affair at an Italian restaurant in Muggle London where the waitress nearly fell over herself to provide the best service ever. The food was excellent and Harry found the company the most

delightful part of the evening, and he was sorry to see the bill arrive. They walked back, through the Leaky Cauldron, where they stopped for a nightcap before Harry walked her home: A small building at the far end of the Alley, "Thank you Harry. I had a wonderful evening." The goodnight kiss was chaste and polite.

He smiled, "So did I," he hesitated, not sure what the next step would be. "Would you care to do this again sometime?" Her raised eyebrow was indicator enough, "That so... did not come out right..." he said sheepishly.

"Never asked a woman out before?" she teased him lightly.

His smile went from relaxed to brittle, "Never had to... Only ever went out with Hermione," his smile was fixed, as he seemed to be staring at something only he could see, "We, fell together... never asked her out, only went on two dates. Never... went that far at all." He snapped out of his reverie, "I'll... owl you," he said, "Good night, Fleur."

He turned and walked away, leaving Fleur alone on the front step to contemplate that thousand-yard stare in solitude. "The mystery of Harry Potter," she realized, too late that she had dropped the metaphorical grenade.

Unbeknownst to the pair, after their nightcap, a figure detached itself from a shadowy corner of the Leaky Cauldron, and spoke to the proprietor for a few moments, "aye, said his name was Harry, Harry Granger something of other... Evander maybe? ... No.... not seen him in about a month.... Her? Fleur Dela...Delacour. Yeah that's it. Passes through mostly. Maybe stops for a cup of tea once in a while." The figure made its way in to the Alley and had the barest glimpse of long blonde hair rounding a distant corner. She stayed well back and observed them from a safe distance, watching her enter the building, while he walked back to Gringotts.

The figure made her way back to the Leaky Cauldron. She tossed a phial of Floo powder in to the flames, "Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Command."

From there, Nymphadora Tonks exited the building and apparated on to the front door step of no. 12, Grimmauld Place. She burst through the front door, tripping over the troll leg umbrella stand,

silenced the shrieking portrait of Walburga Black and burst in on an Order meeting in session, "Think I've found him!" she gasped, "Think I've found Harry Potter!"

Chapter 25

Heartaches in Motion

Harry woke up and was dressed for his morning workout and he joined the tail end of the Goblin line. He matched their regular 120 paces per minute rhythm and followed along, letting his mind wander as he often did during the course of the morning run. His mind, wandered in only one direction: Back to his afternoon, and evening with Fleur, and the way it had ended. Truth be known he could have handled in better.

However, in his mind he was living through it again, starting with their departure from Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, out of the Alley and in to Muggle London. Fleur had been leading the way and their conversation had been serious, about the tragic event that bound the two of them together, as friends, if nothing else.

When they passed under the umpteenth streetlight, he looked up. A fraction of a second earlier or later and the moment would have been lost. Something about the way the light struck her, seemed to light her up from within, "You look beautiful," he told her without registering a word of what she had just asked. That dazzling smile would have melted the heart of any man if she had given it a touch more power. She was doing her best to reign in her Veela traits, keep them under control. It was a subtle gesture and if it were not for the Goblin Occulemency shields, he probably would never have noticed.

She giggled softly and Harry found that he liked the sound. It was not like when Gabrielle had giggled, or Lavender or Parvarti giggled when gossiping. It was soft, and, inviting, and he figured that the more she laughed, the better. "Thank you, Harry. You look rather dashing yourself."

Harry blushed brilliantly at the unexpected compliment. "Well, I had someone with taste helped me pick it out," he managed to say, "This married Goblin I know, has quite an eye for fashion."

She giggled again, and Harry mentally congratulated himself for accomplishing that without making an idiot out of himself. He knew of London, but next to nothing about it at street level and looked to her for direction, "This way," she explained gesturing to the right.

Harry followed her lead, and they walked side by side down the street.

"So how is the job going?" Harry asked her conversationally.

"Oh, it's going alright," she replied. "I have not had many of the customers invite me for coffee and then offer to let me take them out for dinner at a restaurant of my choosing."

Harry chuckled sheepishly at her joke, shrugging slightly. "You are the first friendly face I've seen this summer. I was wondering if I was going to be stuck with Goblins until the September 1."

She looked over at him, met his eyes for a moment and knew that he was being honest. "Ah, here we are," she said, gesturing toward the Italian restaurant in front of them. "I hope you like Italian?"

"Uh huh," he responded.

They entered the restaurant, and she immediately led him to the host. Who looked up at them for a moment before his eyes widened in delight, "Ms. Delacour, I did not think we would have pleasure of your company so soon after last week!" he nodded in the direction of Harry, "Table for two?"

"Yes please Paulo," she said, leaned forward ever so slightly. The unfortunate host could only blink at that wave of something swept over him. Those touch of Veela allure that had quite literally astounded him. Harry could understand that appeal. He would feel it, more than once and it struck as the smell of honey and apples with the freshness of a spring rain. "Right this way, please," he directed them.

Harry waved for Fleur to precede him and followed behind her. He tried not to admire the view too much but could not resist a couple glances, as they were lead to a small table for two set against the wall. It was not so small as to feel cramped, but it wouldn't have sat any more than two people comfortably. "Perhaps," mused Harry, "Paulo thinks this is date." Their waitress approached, menus in hand, "My name is Vanessa, and I'll be your server this evening," she told them as she handed each of them a menu. "If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask." She left them with their

menus, and Harry glanced up at Fleur smiling softly before opening his menu.

Veela detect emotion with ease, and she had felt as much as seen that smile. What she felt, she was not sure how to interpret. That smile he thought was craftily hidden behind a menu was the first one of happiness in quite a while for Harry, but there was the tinge of something else, lust or desire. She shook her head behind her own menu. There were times when being a Veela was a curse: She wondered whether it was her or just that part of her that had piqued the interest the young man opposite her sought to contain.

The menu was not very long but it had variety. Harry knew what some of the items were, having cooked them as the Dursley's kitchen slave but there were a number of them but there dishes he had never even heard of. Fortunately, there was a short description explaining each dish. However, he opted for something simple and set his menu down to engage in what could fast become a dangerous past time: Studying Fleur.

Seeing that he had placed his menu aside she asked, "So what will you be having?"

"Lasagna," he said smoothly, not even bothering to shift his gaze, which fortunately for him was on her face.

"They make a good Lasagna here," she said, "Fettuccini Alfredo with Broccoli and Chicken," she decided, "Did you want to get an appetizer or a salad?"

"Err—I hadn't thought about that," he responded with a sheepish grin. He opened his menu and looked through the list. Half of it seemed foreign to him, and he didn't know what to make of it. He looked over the menu to find her watching him with a small grin on her lips. "Was there something that you wanted?" he asked her.

Her smile grew wider as she answered, "I was thinking some calamari might be nice."

Not really knowing what he was agreeing to, Harry said, "Okay, that works for me."

Their waitress returned a minute later and asked, "Are we ready? Did you want an appetizer to start off?"

Harry glanced at Fleur and saw her give him a slight nod urging him to order it. "Umm, yes, we'd like to have some calamari please," he told her.

"An excellent choice. Are you both ready to order?"

Harry nodded and looked to Fleur to let her go first. She turned to the waiter. "'Fettuccini Alfredo with Broccoli and Chicken,"

She jotted down the order on a pad of paper and turned to Harry. "And for you, sir?"

"Lasagna," Harry replied.

"Excellent," the waiter said as she jotted the order down. "I'll have your appetizer out for you shortly. Now what can I get you both to drink?" Given the limitations of age, they both stuck to water. The waitress nodded and wandered off, presumably back to the kitchen to place their order.

"So Harry," Fleur broke the silence a moment later, "what have you been up to since the last time I saw you?"

"Oh, well I've been jogging and working out in the mornings as usual," he told her. A small smile graced her lips as she listened. "And I've been doing a little studying as well, since the school year is starting up soon."

The conversation... the conversation... having watched it and replayed it a half dozen times, he was not sure if it meant anything at all. They always, invariable came back to the Triwizard Tournament and its aftermath, "...least he did not suffer..." she blinked and pulled back slightly, "Merde. Harry I am so sorry..."

"It's okay," Harry told her with a slightly sad smile as he reached across the table and placed his hand atop hers. "It's okay. It's the truth... his death was painless," he clamped down, hard on his emotions at that point, He was barely able to keep himself from freezing the table, and had to actually channel a little warmth to keep the wood from cracking like dropped porcelain. "I've had..."

some time to come to terms with it... all of it. Don't feel bad about it, really. I'm okay talking about it."

"I still feel just awful for bringing all that up," she told him.

"Don't," he said firmly, squeezing her hand, gently, "We both need to work through it, more than anyone else could need to, or understand." He shrugged, "we're probably going to be seeing a lot of each other, and, it is nice, to have someone else, who can understand." He let out a mental sigh of relief. At least their table would not break when Vanessa returned with their starter now. "Speak of the devil," he mused.

She appeared at the table to serve their starter and she gave his hand a quick squeeze before letting him pull away. Harry waited and let Fleur make the first move. She saw that he was waiting on her and gave him a smile for his efforts. She pushed a small pile of the squid onto her small plate and poured a bit of marinara sauce over it. He smiled at her and mimicked her actions. He skewered one of the breaded pieces and chewed it, carefully, curiously before smiling and nodding to himself. Fleur giggled softly and asked, "Is that your first time having calamari?"

"Uh huh," he replied.

"I could tell," she told him. "Your reaction was cute."

Harry felt his face heat up and knew that his cheeks must be stained red. He mumbled a "Thanks," and forked another piece.

They ate their way through the calamari and waited only a moment before the waiter appeared to claim the empty dish. "Your meal will be ready shortly," she informed them. "I'll be back in a minute with it."

He and Fleur chatted for a minute as they waited for their main dishes. Sure enough, the waiter was back carrying two plates. She placed their dished and introduced them, "Bon appetite," she said to them merrily.

"Thanks," they both replied. They grinned at each other for a moment before turning to their meals. They talked a little as they ate, but they mostly just enjoyed their meal. Harry found that he rather

enjoyed the restaurant's take on the dish. He did not fancy himself a great chef or anything, but he thought that he made a decent meal on his own. However, his dinner here was fantastic. He told Fleur as much.

"I'm glad you like it," she told him. "I wasn't sure what kind of food you liked, but I figured Italian was a pretty safe bet."

"It was a good choice," he told her earnestly.

Soon enough they were finishing their meals and she returned to clear the china, "Any dessert for you or coffee?"

Harry looked at Fleur. She shook her head slightly to show that she did not want anything else, so Harry replied, "No, I think we're both pleasantly full."

"Very well, I will just leave this with you then," She said as he placed the check in the middle of the table. Fleur's hand snaked out to take Harry's, in an attempt to distract him from taking the bill. She set a single pulse of her charm towards him. It worked as he looked up in surprise.

"Consider this, my treat Harry," she said, "Happy Birthday."

They walked through the restaurant and out onto the street again. Harry turned to Fleur unsure of what he was supposed to do now. "Thanks again for setting everything up. I really enjoyed dinner."

"Me too," she replied. "The company was especially nice."

Harry's face turned scarlet yet again as he responded, "I really enjoyed spending the evening with you too."

She smiled back at him warmly and the two stood there silently grinning at each other for a minute. "Umm, do you live nearby?"

"At the moment, I live at the far end of Diagon Alley," she told him with a brilliant smile. "And an escort would be lovely."

"Great," he replied. "Shall we?"

"Indeed," she responded.

She gestured to the right, and they set off down the street together. After a minute of walking silently, she reached her hand and placed her palm against his. He spread his fingers and intertwined them with hers. He glanced over at her and flashed a wide grin at the gesture. She returned his smile, and they continued to walk.

They stopped at the Leaky Cauldron, just for a nightcap, even though neither of them had anything stronger than tea, and then resumed their journey in to Diagon Alley. All too soon, they were standing outside her building.

"Thank you Harry. I had a wonderful evening," she told him as she leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She stepped up and hugged him briefly. He wrapped his arms around her to return the gesture. She released him slightly and looked into his eyes for a moment, their faces only inches apart. She parted her lips slightly in anticipation, and Harry fought to keep his nerves in check. She closed her eyes and leaned slightly forward. He tilted his head slightly and met her halfway. He closed his own eyes as their lips met. It was a brief kiss, but it seemed right, somehow.

A part of him did feel guilty, very guilty about that. But it was not as if he had planned the whole evening with this in mind. A part of him wondered, and a part of him dared. He had the skills, but he held back. He remembered what Marinashka had told him, "Do not become that which you fight against." All of that took place in the fraction of a second. He knew, then, as he did right this instant, he had done the right thing by staying out of her mind.

He smiled, "So did I," he hesitated, not sure what the next step would be. "Would you care to do this again sometime?" Her raised eyebrow was indicator enough, "That so... did not come out right..." he said sheepishly.

"Never asked a woman out before?" she teased him lightly.

His smile went from relaxed to brittle, "Never had to... Only ever went out with Hermione," his smile was fixed, as he seemed to be staring at something only he could see, "We, fell together... never asked her out, only went on two dates. Never... went that far at all." He snapped out of his reverie, "I'll... owl you," he said, "Good night, Fleur."

Harry had kicked himself last night on his walk back to Gringotts, and then on the cart ride back to the Clan Sanctuary where Griphook's had his family home. Moreover, he had spent his entire morning workout, on automatic pilot without and realized it only as he came to a halt outside Griphook's Khazag.

Harry paused to survey his surroundings, taking it all in and he realized it would probably never cease to amaze him. The cavern roof was almost fifty feet overhead, allow for buildings of no more than three or four floors in height. Tall perhaps by wizarding standards, but miniscule compared to the towering skyscrapers muggles have built. Roads and pedestrian sidewalks linked the various streets to different districts. The karts were a part of an extensive network that functioned along the same lines as the London Underground. He shook his head, marveling at it all. If only the rest of the world knew what lay beneath so many of their hills and mountains.

Not that it mattered. Harry took his morning shower, breakfasted with his adoptive family and hopped on the kart, heading in to Gringotts, where he would set the wheels in motion, to snare himself a headmaster.

His first meeting was with the Goblin Property Office. It had not taken them long to find the first of the two properties. They had found three properties that fit his requirements and finally settled on the second property, "I would like to visit this one." One Floo trip and half an hour later and Harry was satisfied that it's opulence would be more than enough to have his aunt and uncle drooling. He signed the necessary paperwork setup for an immediate closing of the sale and had the Goblins ward the property immediately, effectively making it invisible to the entire wizarding world.

Taking a sales brochure and photos of the property, it was a trip on the Knight Bus back to little Whinging and Privet Drive. It was not part of the plan however, to encounter both his Aunt and Uncle, sitting in the living room watching television. They opened the door and were clearly less than pleased to see him, "Having a nice enough summer without you and your unnaturalness around. What do you want? Your freak friends decide to disassociate themselves with you?"

"Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon" he nodded, ignoring their remarks, "I came here, for two things: I'm here to say a permanent good bye, and to do you a favor," he thrust out the sales brochure and the photos with one hand, "You want the place, and it's yours on a few conditions."

"If you are leaving, you are already doing us a huge favor!" his uncle spat.

Harry glared at him and resisted the temptation to go for his wand, to truly educate this... thing about manners. It took him a moment to compose himself and deep breath before he could speak calmly, "A few minutes for me to explain, I'll answer your questions and I'm out of your lives for good. Isn't that reason enough?"

They nodded warily, and let him in to the living room, "Less than three months ago, Voldemort rose from the grave," Petunia gasped and sat up, "My parents will stated that I was never supposed to come here if anything happened to them. Dumbledore," he growled, "played both of you, and dictated the course of the first fourteen years of my life. I am not going to let him do it anymore. For that, I need you all, gone."

His aunt and uncle kept their comments to themselves at least. They stared at him, giving him full attention for once. "The house is ready and you will be able to move in tomorrow."

"What do you want in exchange?" asked Vernon quietly. Say what you want - and one could say a great deal but you could not deny his skills as a negotiator. It was what he did for a living: Negotiate business deals.

"I have four conditions: The first is that you have no more contact with the magical world. Ever. I am having your new home warded so it's invisible to the magic world, and I'll leave you with a £100,000 to buy whatever you need to fix it up to your liking. Two, when you move, take nothing. Nothing!" he emphasized, "Pack your suitcases and they will be delivered, tag the furniture you want to keep with these," he dropped a pack of bright yellow post it notes on the coffee table, "and the furniture will be delivered along with your luggage in a matter of hours. Thirdly, sign these. Emancipation documents that make me an adult in the wizarding world, and we'll never see each

other again," he handed the stack over to Vernon, "Finally, this is an all or nothing deal: Accept it as is or not at all."

His "family" sat dumfounded, staring at Harry and the photos of the gorgeous home. "But what about our friends?" his aunt gasped.

Harry barely suppressed a snort of laughter, "What friends?" he thought, but he smiled, "Once you move, you are invisible to the magical world. Call them and tell them whatever you want. You'll have a new home, I'll be out of your life, and the only magic you'll have to worry about is the crap you see on TV. What do you say?"

They looked at each other for a moment and then nodded, "Good." Harry handed over a stack of documentation, "Titles, deeds, etcetera." Harry said, "I'll give you a few minutes to look it over." He went in to the kitchen and opened the fridge. There was a variety of soft drinks and sodas, but Harry spied something stronger and grabbed a can of beer. He sipped it, sitting at the kitchen table for a moment, when movement beyond the garden caught his attention. He focused on the area and reached out with his legilimency. He found something that he would deal with, shortly.

Vernon chose that moment to amble in to the kitchen, "It's all in order," he grunted, a sound that was a mix of greed, appreciation, disgust and gratitude, "So... when are you leaving?"

Harry checked the paperwork, and found it complete. Every line, every signature, and all the dates were in order. He stared in to his uncle's face, for what he hoped would be the last time ever, "Now." His uncle grunted and made his way upstairs, as Harry made his way to the front door, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Aunt Petunia?"

She removed her hand, "Thank you," she whispered.

He shrugged, "My mother, was your sister, and you are a part of the little family I have left. We don't... get along, but somebody I loved...love, told me that family sticks together." He kept his face passive but he felt his hands tingle and grow slightly warm.

"Loved?" she asked cautiously, "And love?"

He nodded, bluntly, "She was murdered, the night Voldemort was resurrected." He hesitated but a surge of bitterness compelled him to ask, "What was my mother like? When you knew her?" his aunt's shoulder stiffened, "You must have liked her, been close before she went to Hog... my school."

His aunt said nothing, bustling back in to the kitchen to get a cup of tea. Harry followed her in and waited. Finally, she sat down with her cup and gestured for him to do the same. He blinked in surprise at the streaks of tears upon her face, "We were close before that accursed letter," Aunt Petunia said, barely above a whisper, "we were less than two years apart... I was only eighteen months older," she stalled.

Harry's irritation leapt to the fore and he did not bother asking. He went in, subtly. The memories were fresh, at the forefront of her mind, making them easy to access, to see and read without any digging. His aunt said nothing, staring in to space for a long moment as more tears rolled down her face. The memories were revealing, showing two close sisters who grew somewhat apart but stayed in constant contact. "You said your parents didn't mind her being a witch."

Her jaw clenched in rage and for a long moment, she said nothing, "Voldemort..." she said. The repressed memories sprang forward like a sledgehammer in to Harry's mental probe. And he winced, "James and Lily were engaged. Voldemort and his... Death Eaters," she whispered, "They attacked the engagement party but missed James and Lily by a few minutes, Vernon and I by perhaps ten..."

He could see it all: how they had driven up and saw the green glow, the great skull with its forked snake tongue floating over the house. How they rushed inside and found the engaged couple, each crying over their own parents. He could understand why she hated the wizarding world. "Go," she whispered, "Please... take care... don't die... Lily...Lily would never forgive me, if anything happened to you."

With a nod, Harry walked out of Number 4, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, forever.

Chapter 26

Plans and Punch-ups

Harry left and made his way along the street, cutting across towards a park gate. Magnolia Road, like Privet Drive was full of large square houses with perfectly manicured lawns that drove very clean cars similar to Uncle Vernons. "Talk about an army of clones," mused Harry idly as he walked. Halfway along Magnolia Road, he ducked in to the shadows of a lilac tree and waited as Dudley's gang came in to view, probably saying their farewells

"...squealed like a pig, didn't he?" Malcolm was saying to guffaws from the others.

"Nice right hook, Big D," said the present sycophant Piers.

"So, Gordon, your place tomorrow?" said Dudley.

"Yeah. My parents will be out."

They said their good-byes and went their separate ways, their voices fading as he headed around the corner into Magnolia Crescent and Dudley, humming tunelessly came within hailing distance, "Hey, Big D."

Dudley turned, "Oh," he grunted, "You."

"How long have you been "Big D" then?" asked Harry using air quotes.

"Shaddup!" snarled Dudley as turned away.

"It's a nice nickname," said Harry grinning as he fell in step along side his cousin, "Even if one of your husband's picked it out for you," Dudley snarled and spun to face Harry, "But you'll always be 'ickle diddykins to me."

"I said shaddup!" growled Dudley, whose hands had curled in to fists. It was taking all of Dudley's self-control to keep from hitting Harry. A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction as he met Dudley's glare head on.

This was a reckoning of sorts, a long time coming. They were standing in a narrow alleyway where Harry had seen his godfather for the first time. It was a short cut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk, empty and darker because it had no streetlights. "Think you're such a big shot huh? Think you're the baddest ass because you carry that thing with you?"

"What thing?" asked Harry, "Oh right," he drew his wand, "You mean this thing? Not as stupid as you look, are you? But if you were, you wouldn't be able to walk and talk at the same time." He raised it.

"You're not allowed to!" Dudley said at once, "I know you're not! Use it and you'd get expelled from that freak school you go to!"

"My freak school, my freak world, is at war, Big D," Harry said quietly, "In times of war, things are different. Think you mentioned it to me, a year or two ago, you know, when you were beating on me. "Snafu," you said, "Situation Normal, All Fucked Up," meaning my situation I suppose." He wore a death's head grin, "my normal situation is all fucked up, or to be regularly fucked up by you and your friends, Big D," he drawled, much as Snape did, "I, am about to explain to you," he twirled his wand experimentally, "What SNAFU really means."

"They have not!" said Dudley, though he did not sound the least bit convinced or convincing. Harry laughed, "You couldn't take me on, man to man, could you?" Dudley snarled, "Hiding behind your freakish weirdness! You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out..."

"Run to your father, almighty boxing champion," Harry growled, "This has been a long time coming," Harry holstered his wand, and cracked his knuckles, "You want a boxing match?" Harry's hands curled in to fists, "Come on Big D," Harry adopted the fifth of the nine Nekratal - goblin close combat stance, "I'll give you a reason to pound me in to the pavement," Harry spat, and then literally spat in to Dudley's face.

That was all it took to provoke the fight of Harry's dreams. Dudley had taken up boxing, and could use his hands to devastating effect. The first two-punch combo took Harry in the gut. There was a follow up right cross that Harry blocked, and countered by slapping Dudley across the face.

They broke apart and circled each other for a moment. Dudley was lighter on his feet than Harry remembered and he made a note of that enhanced mobility. The muggle was still a bit on the pudgy side, but no one could say that he was baby killer whale size. He came in again, both fists flailing. Harry blocked, sidestepped and twisted Dudley's arm aside and slapped him again, this time on the opposite cheek. They broke apart a second time, and Dudley shook his head to clear the stars and static before his eyes. Harry went on the offensive.

The goblin style of unarmed close combat turned hands and knees, feet and elbows in to weapons as Harry demonstrated, leading with a foot sweep that stumbled Dudley. There was no blocking the knee to the stomach. Dudley doubled over as Harry's interlinked hands came down upon Dudley's broad back like a sledgehammer.

Dudley roared and powered forward, slamming Harry back first in to the wall. The boxing match was over. "How long you planning on letting this continue?" hissed a very concerned Nyphadora Tonks.

"From what I've heard," growled the one legged, one-eyed Auror, "This is a decade and a half of anger, rage and frustration finding an outlet. So long as they don't do permanent damage to each other... and nobody gets killed," he shrugged, "Let them work out their differences."

It was a street fight. The elbow slammed in to Dudley's spine, once, then twice forcing him to break off the attack and stagger back. Pain and rage was in the muggle's eyes. Harry's emerald eyes betrayed fourteen years of hate and anger. "I don't need magic to beat the crap out of you Dudley Dursley," snarled Harry, "My bare hands are more than sufficient for the task!"

Dudley's face was red and the left side of his face would probably bruise deeply from that openhanded slap. The leg sweep had done some damage to Dudley's knee, hampering mobility as he refused to put his full weight on that leg. Harry was smarting as well. However, he bore it better. The Cruciatus Curse teaches you that: A bruised, possibly broken rib was a minor footnote for Harry's medical file - and an impressive medical file it is.

The fight was a balance between Dudley's overwhelming power that could end the fight in one or two solid connections, and Harry's agility and speed that let him slip in, strike and dance out of range.

Dudley moved forward, arm outstretched in an attempt to clothesline his opponent. Harry almost laughed at the application of a television-wrestling maneuver in real life. As he dropped below the outstretched arm, turning to face Dudley's ample posterior as he shot past. Harry could not resist the temptation of the target and lashed out, with a perfect standing sidekick that propelled the still moving target face first in to the wall with a sickening crack. Stunned, Dudley reared and turned drunkenly to face Harry, blood dripping from his nose as he fell to his knees.

Harry took the opening and lead with an elbow aimed for the temple. Dudley reared up and rammed Harry in the nose. A vicious head butt was the first, followed by a second and a third that staggered Harry back. He had felt and heard the bones in his nose break as Dudley followed up, throwing a dazzling combination of lefts and rights. Several of the blows found their mark knocking Harry to the ground.

Dudley laughed, "With your magic, you could take me easy freak. You can't fight like a man and win. Freaks, never win." Dudley kicked Harry on to his back, and straddled him, grabbing a fistful of Harry's hair. Dudley blinked in surprise, and let go, staggering back and upright, holding his throat, gasping for air.

"You let your guard down," explained Harry, shaking his right hand. When striking Dudley in the throat, he had felt something crack in his wrist. There was pain, but not enough to stop him as he dropped in to the third Nekratal.

"You never mock your opponent." The first punch rocked Dudley back a step.

"You never talk to your opponent." The second blow snapped his head round, and the rest of Dudley followed.

"You never stop attacking your opponent." The kick took Dudley in the gut and as he bent over, the follow up, reverse sidekick, knocked him back upright.

"You never, turn your back on your opponent." Hissed Harry as he pulled back his fist and punched Dudley in the nose, "Until dead or unconscious."

Dudley fell like a sack of dropped potatoes and lay still, moaning in pain. "Magic," gasped Harry, "not required, not wanted, not needed, to put trash, muggle, trash like you where you belong." It was anger, rage and a sense of righteous viciousness. It was a dark streak that Harry was not even aware that he possessed as he raised a booted foot and slammed it down on Dudley's hand. The crack of splintering bone was only drowned by the fat teenager's scream of agony as he curled in to a ball, clutching his ruined hand, "Let's see you box now, mother fucker."

There was something in the alleyway apart from them, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt as the temperature dropped around them, and he heard it, drawing its almost trademark, long rattling breath. Harry's breath steamed in the sudden cold.

Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one. With a flick of his wrist, his wand was in his hand, and his stomach turned over. A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly towards him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking in daylight, spewing out nightmares as it came. Stumbling backwards, Harry raised his wand, "Expecto Patronum!"

A silvery wisp of vapor shot from the tip of the wand and the Dementor slowed, but the spell had not worked properly; tripping over his own feet, Harry retreated further. The Dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain as a pair of grey, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the Dementor's robes, reaching for him, "Expecto Patronum!" An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry's wand; its antlers caught the Dementor where the heart should have been throwing it backwards as the Dementor swooped away.

From the shadows, a pair of voices reached Harry casting their own Patroni. A Stallion, followed moments later by an Albatross of the same silvery light emerged. The Stallion charging down the Dementor approaching from the other end of the alley as the

Albatross took up position overhead, almost as if eager for a Dementor to challenge.

A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighboring gardens and the mundane rumble of cars in Magnolia Crescent filled the air again. Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt return to normality. After a moment, he became aware that his T-shirt was sticking to him; he was drenched in sweat and blood, "Most of that, is probably mine," thought Harry.

He could not believe what had just happened. Dementors! Here, in Little Whinging. More importantly, Harry rounded on the shadows, "Lumos Maxima!" The same glowing light from the third task illuminated the alley, and he found himself alone, with Dudley, pale and shaking with fear where he lay on the ground curled in to a ball. "Homenum revelio!"

"Accio Invisibility Cloaks!" the cloaks leapt across the alley and in to Harry's outstretched left hand, "Reducio!" the charm shrunk the cloaks to the size of paper napkins which he immediately stuffed in to his pocket, "I don't appreciate being followed," his eyes narrowed, "Especially by Dumbledore's lackeys!"

"Impressive Potter," grunted Mad Eye Moony, who also had his wand out and leveled at Harry, "Dumbledore told me you were good, but not that you were this good."

Harry eyed the pair of them. It made sense that if one was an Auror, so was the other. Moreover, if one is Dumbledore's lackey, so was the other. "How'd you find me?" he asked, partly out of curiosity, partly to buy time to plan his escape.

"You walked out of Gringotts this morning," said the pink haired witch. Harry's eyes hardened, "And Fleur's date last night matched the description of someone who was seen walking around about a month ago who vanished in to Gringotts and never came out. I managed to overhear parts of your conversation, discussing the Triwizard Tournament, including details that only the champions themselves would have known."

"So I made a mistake," said Harry, "I guess the next question is," he gestured ever so slightly with his wand, "Where do we go from here?"

"You come with us," said the woman sharply, "Dumbledore..."

"Fuck Dumbledore!" snarled Harry cutting her off, "That manipulative sonofabitch has done nothing right by me."

"Be that as it may," growled Moody, "I'm pretty sure your relatives are getting owls from the Misuse of Magic Office, right now." He kept silent for a moment, but realized that those owls did not matter. He was never coming back, and once they moved tomorrow, they would be in the clear. They simply, did not matter. Harry shrugged.

"They could face charges, trial, time in a ministry holding cell... possibly Azkaban..." said the Auror, whose hair was suddenly a violent shade of purple.

"Interesting ability, and frankly, I don't care about my relatives much...or about them at all." Harry commented, "Ms.?"

"Auror Tonks," she snapped, with a sidelong glance at her fellow Auror, "don't even think about it." She growled at him.

"Auror Tonks, Auror Moody," said Harry as he took a careful step backwards, "Let's look at this realistically." Their wands followed him, "I will not surrender my wand, and I definitely will not come quietly." His hand reached up to around his neck, and was not surprised to find that the emergency portkey around his neck would not activate. He made a mental note to learn how to apparate in the next few weeks. He took another step back.

"Potter, don't do anything stupid," warned Moody.

Harry laughed, "Do something stupid?" he repeated, "Do you know what your great and wise leader has done? To me? To people I love and care about? And you're worried about me, doing something stupid?"

The Owl fluttered down in to the alley, hooting at Harry as it fluttered in to a landing atop the garbage can next to him. The letter attached to its leg bore the wax seal of Ministry of Magic and he removed the letter and pocketed it without a glance. The owl soared back in to the sky.

There was a pulse of magic, almost like a shockwave that radiated out from somewhere behind him. Harry half turned and had raised a shield, and cursed under his breath: Phoenix fire. Albus Dumbledore took shape, and as the last of the flames vanished, Fawkes sat on his shoulder, "Harry my boy..." said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling merrily, as usual.

"Shut it, old man," growled Harry to the surprise of both Aurors present, "You and me, we have business to discuss. The Leaky Cauldron, Friday morning at ten."

The summer had not gone well for Albus Dumbledore. First Voldemort had risen. Then Harry had literally punched him out. Then the boy had vanished, causing no small amount of panic and confusion. The ministry was denying the rebirth of Voldemort as the wizarding media under its control slandered both their names and reputations. "Harry," said Dumbledore, "The ministry wants your wand. They are going to attempt to expel you from Hogwarts at the hearing I arranged."

"There are precious few people in the world who have given a damn about what I want or about me as a person. My friends care about me. My Hermione cared about me, cared for me. She loved me!" he snarled, "You were never my friend. When it comes to the Ministry, I've never been in their good book. So I don't care what the Ministry bloody well wants," said Harry, "I don't really care what you want either. And they can't snap a wand that doesn't exist."

"Harry, what has happened to you?" asked Dumbledore quietly, "We were never the closest, but I thought we were friends... I am not the one responsible for the events of that night."

Harry burst out laughing, "Friends? Us? Friends? Voldemort was right about you," that caused both Aurors to blink, "When he had her, my Hermione, screaming under the Cruciatus Curse..." Harry blinked, "Dumbledore, I would get out of there if I were you." He warned, "Dumbledore," Harry's warning drew out of the syllables of the headmaster's name in a sing song fashion, "Last... no. No more chances!"

The headmaster rocked back a step by the savage ferocity of Harry's mental counterattack that essentially rammed Voldemort's

words in to the headmaster's mind, "He said that to you?" asked Dumbledore, "and you believe him?"

"Look at your actions, involving just me," said Harry, "Look at them, look back upon them. He has tried to kill me four times. Not a nice thing to do, but at least he has been honest enough to admit, explain and even justify why at three of our four encounters," explained Harry, "What excuse, what justification do you have? Think about that when we meet on Friday morning at The Leaky Cauldron."

A twirl and slash of his wand and there were suddenly a half dozen Harrys standing in the alley. The barrage of spells from so many different wands had the leader of the Order of the Phoenix and both Auror's on the defensive for several seconds, long enough for Harry to levitate himself up and out of the alley. He landed lightly on the roof with a smirk on his face. He waved to the trio left in the alley over an unconscious Dudley, "Heal him and send him home," said Harry, "Please." He added as almost an afterthought before activating the portkey around his neck and vanishing.

Less than hour later, the members of the Order of the Phoenix gathered in Number 12. Moreover, the discussion was one that did not stay in Dumbledore's favor for long. Both Moody and Tonks asked a number of pointed questions, and Molly Weasley was quick to raise defense of her adopted, eighth child. "How could things have come to this, so quickly?" wondered the aged wizard to himself as he read a copy of the letter from the Misuse of Magic Office yet again.

"Harry would not have done magic without need to, Albus," said Arthur wearily. This conversation had gone round in circles for the better part of an hour, and it came back to this and the noticeable changes in Harry since the end of the Triwizard Tournament.

"He knew some fairly advanced spells as well," muttered Moody, "That duplication charm is Auror grade magic and he could control them. Their spells were a light show, but a spectacularly convincing one. He may be fifteen now, but he's not a child anymore." Moody shrugged, "I don't think he's ever been much of one."

That drew a number of sharp looks from all around, and the veteran took a long pull on his hip flask, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I've read the file on Mr. Potter at the Ministry," no secret

as he was the one that pulled a copy for the Order. "Defeated Voldermort as an infant, defeated him as a possessing spirit at the age of 11, killed a Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets at the age of 12," he was ticking off his points on his fingers. "Rescued his god father Sirius Black and held off a hundred Dementors with a single Patronus at the age of 13. Do I need to say what happened his last school year?"

"The poor boy," muttered Molly, "No childhood indeed, and he never really had a place to call home, did he Albus?" Molly was building up to one her patented eruptions, "The Dursleys! The very worst of muggle kind! No better than the Witch Hunters of the past! And you forced him to call that place home!" Arthur placed a hand on Molly's arm and she subsided for a moment.

"But what I want to know," said Tonks, "was what exactly did he mean Albus? When he said he could bury you?"

He sighed, "Harry knows a number of things, that he would be better of not knowing anything about. And I fear what he might do with that information for the damage could be tremendous to not only us, and the Order, but for the Light in general."

"Well, it can't be all bad, can it?" Tonks, pointed out reasonably, "He did say that he wanted to meet you." The headmaster could only nod, "So go see what he wants and maybe" she shrugged, "you give it to him, if it will help patch things up between you two."

In Gringotts, a blood soaked Harry had healed his own wounds, cleaned off the blood and was sitting with his lawyers. He waited patiently as they reviewed the letter and then let him tell them all exactly what had happened, with Dudley, with the Auror pair and then the leader of the Order of The Phoenix. Marinashka shook her head, "I'm not sure what you hoped to achieve by beating your cousin near senseless Harry."

He shrugged, "Fifteen years of hatred, anger and abuse," he smiled sardonically, "If I'd kept it bottled up any longer, I might have killed him," he shrugged again, "Or someone else... I don't see the Ministry as having much influence on my plans, do you?"

"A trial does not make you look like a teenager who can be trusted to look after himself," said Marinashka, "That is what the prosecution will argue."

"All the more reason to push through on my emancipation, as quickly as possible," he said smoothly, "plus I think a trial can be put to some, good use..."

The glow from the lamp light only highlighted the concern of Marinashka's face, "You intend to expose Dumbledore?"

"Only if it becomes necessary. We'll see how Friday goes..."

Ron Weasley stared out his attic bedroom window, watching the gnome infested garden. On the surface he seemed calm and collected but there was actually a firestorm of anger, rage and jealousy looming within him. It was not fair! Even if you did blame him and only him for ruining the friendship, he had with Harry - and he was not the only one to blame - why was he treated like a prisoner in his own home?

Draco had invited him to spend a couple of weeks at Malfoy Manor but his parents had simply refused to listen to him on the subject. Charlie was working, Bill was in Romania, Ginny, Fred and George were still tight with the half blood prince of Gryffindor and were in regular correspondence with him and saw him every few days without fail. They did not even bother to invite him or ask him how he was doing or feeling, or anything!

The fuming redhead stalked and stomped more than walked in to the living room; where his mother was preparing to leave. She had been going somewhere for the past week, without ever saying a word to anyone where exactly she was going. While it had perked his curiosity, the last thing he wanted was express an interest in what anyone in his family was doing, since they did not seem to care in the slightest about him!

He pulled a fresh sheet of parchment and dipped his quill before beginning yet another letter to Draco, fully aware that he was not sure if he was going to be able to finish this one, let alone actually send it to him. "I'm a pureblood!" he thought, "I should not have to bow and beg from anybody!"

He recalled how worried his mother had been when Harry had pulled his disappearing act, and now the git had done magic in public, in full view of a muggle, and was going to trial. With a start, he scrunched up the parchment and began another letter to Draco, this one, he was confident would delight him.

"Draco,

Surprised that you have not replied to my previous messages, but I hope you're enjoying your summer holidays. Mine's been the absolute pits, as you already know. I suppose you've already heard about Potter and his brush with the Ministry of Magic. With a little luck and some persuasion from your father, I have no doubt that Potter will get what's coming to him."

The letter went on for another few paragraphs, going in to detail about his virtual imprisonment, and how it was unfair that they had not allowed him to join Draco in Spain for the summer. While railing about the grave injustices committed against him, he also mentioned that his mother was up to something. She had been leaving early in the morning for the past several weeks and returning late in the evening.

"No idea where she goes or what she's up to but my father definitely knows something about it. I think my brothers and sister might also know. Sometimes she or the twins go with my mother, but never all of them together"

With a start, he realized that he wasn't far off track. Whatever was going on, they didn't want him to know about it. Well not the specifics of it anyway, he thought, "I'd have spotted the pattern sooner or later," but they always left on foot, never by floo so he had no chance of finding out just where they were going. No matter. He finished the letter and whistled to Pig, who fluttered down with a soft hoot. Tying the message to the owl's leg, Ron shook his head, "Least I could have gotten a standard sized Owl instead of that...scrap of bird."

That brought back memories of a certain wanted criminal godfather, Sirius Black. Ronald Weasley smiled for the first time in days, wondering if there was some way he could use what he knew to put the hurt on Potter.

Chapter 27

Blackmail

That Friday morning, Harry sat at the bar, in the Leaky Cauldron, disguised as his alter ego, sipping a glass of water. Tom had been more than happy to provide a private room as a meeting place. When five hundred galleons had been dropped in to his hands, Tom had kept his word and the premises was empty, except for Harry and a number of disguised Goblins, dotted around the establishment. The goblins had seen to the necessary wards to ensure that the meeting stayed private.

Harry waited, a few minutes before ten. Harry was not surprised to see the headmaster present, but the headmaster had dragged all of his friends along: The twins, Neville, Ginny, even Colin Creevey he noted with a touch of ire. What surprised Harry was the presence of one Ronald Weasley.

"I guess, I forgot to specify, a private meeting," said Harry, with mock politeness. Dumbledore sighed. He knew it would be difficult at best to talk to Harry. A trio of Goblin's flanked Harry, and Dumbledore felt confident that with his friends here, and the Order waiting just outside, he would have no problems in convincing Harry to let the past go, and fulfill his destiny as the weapon to defeat Voldemort.

The gathered teens had moved ever so slightly away from a sulky Ron as they watched and waited for the other shoe to drop as the Beacon of the Light and the Boy-with-too-many-over-hyphenated titles stared at each other. "It is clear Harry, that I have made numerous mistakes," said the Headmaster carefully. His position was precarious at best, "If you would collect your belongings, we can go somewhere to discuss this quietly."

"Not happening." Said Harry calmly, "In case that needs clarification: No."

"Harry, you are not safe here. I would like to conclude this discussion with you in private, especially what to do about the Ministry's Disciplinary Hearing about using magic in front of a muggle - even if it was your cousin - and then get you back to Privet Drive, where you would be safest, or the headquarters of the Order."

"I don't think anyone else in the room failed to understand me. So let me make this clear: No. I am not leaving with you. No, I am not going anywhere with you." Harry's voice never rose from their initial soft tones, but the hardness in his eyes and the firm set of his mouth spoke volumes.

Harry noted his friends had placed a subtle distance between themselves and the headmaster, "Harry. You will come with me," the headmaster said firmly, "Your Goblin friends, may be able to defend you. But I do not think that you want to force a confrontation here, not here, not with your friends present." he paused, and snapped his fingers, "The Order of the Phoenix, has at least three times the number of wands. We will take you with or without a fight."

"First things first," said Harry calmly, "That thing standing by itself with red hair is not my friend. It is an oath breaker." That pronouncement alone was enough to cause a great deal of consternation amongst everyone present. "Second, I came here to talk. And you open your side of the discussion with threats," said Harry shaking his head, "People, the Daily Prophet, Snape even, calls me hot tempered, spoilt by fame and a lot of other things, but I'm not the one threatening violence."

The door to the Leaky Cauldron slammed open on its hinges as a number of witches and wizards filed in. He recognized the parents of his friends amongst them: The Weaselys, Xenophilius Lovegood and Remus Lupin as well. Harry shook his head and first addressed his friends, "I'm sorry it has come to this," he said, "You know me. You trusted me once, and I failed," he admitted, "I failed to protect her, and I failed, to protect all of you from that. I will carry that stain on my soul until I die. I would have you do me one last favor, because we are, or," Harry drew a shuddering breath, "were friends, because of what he is going to force to happen here." The adults in the room were holding or fingering their wands, worried about what exactly they had just walked in to as Harry pointed out the door, ironically in to the sunlight, "Walk away."

"This is my battle, my war, my responsibility." He said quietly, "Don't... get drawn in to this." There are people, who are natural born strategists and tacticians. There are those that kill plants with as little as a glance, "I don't want to force you to choose sides." There are those who can inspire loyalty. "I don't want to put any of

you, at odds with your parents, over me. I'm not... worth that." Moreover, there are those who can inspire fanatical loyalty and never understand what it is they do to inspire it.

The gaggle of six teenagers looked at each other, muttering to themselves then muttering to each other, and then Ginny nodded, the twins agreed. Neville's nod was firm, Luna wore the same dreamy smile she had always worn but was in clear agreement. Colin hesitated for only a moment and then they had reached a consensus. An agreement: They began to walk.

They walked across the Leaky Cauldron, away from the gathered members of the Order of the Phoenix, away from the adults, away from parents and family. The six teenagers ignored the wands that rose as they walked. Faces changed, from surprise, to shock, some bore a trace of horror, but all had the same tinge of disbelief. Six teenagers stood in front of Harry Potter.

"The Slytherins called us your Honor Guard," said Fred, "And my dear brother of mine and I did try to get in to the Potter Harem."

"They were trying to poke fun of us or some such," cut in Ginny.

"...and that was a lifetime ago..." continued George in agreement with his siblings.

"...but there was something the Goblin's once said... how did, it go?" asked George, looking at the other five.

"Something about honor?" suggested Luna dreamily as she swept a lock of hair behind her right ear, discreetly palming her wand.

"Something else about loyalty," said Colin, Harry noticed the young boy's hand was in his pocket, and clenched.

"Honor and loyalty," said Harry, "Before profit."

The six nodded to each other, one last time, and to Harry's utter amazement, turned to face the adults, took a step back until they were standing in line with him, "Harry leaves here one way: Over my dead body," growled Colin, the youngest of them all.

"If he doesn't want to leave," began Fred, bringing his wand up.

"Then he doesn't have to." completed George as he mirrored his brother.

"We'll make sure of that," added Ginny.

Remus Lupin nearly had a heart attack right there: Harry had been doing more than grieving. It was as if he had set this up. Then he saw the look of dumbfounded disbelief upon Harry's face. That made it clear to him that Harry had nothing to do with this.

Dumbledore stared in disbelief, unable to process that a group of teenagers would stand up to him. They had agreed to help! To help him! However, Dumbledore realized that these were teenagers, and would side with one of their own over any adult. Dumbledore, however refused to be cowed and spoke as if he had all the authority and power he would ever need, "Nothing changes Harry. You are coming with us."

Dumbledore raised his wand slightly and suddenly he found himself, in the crosshairs of six teenagers and three goblins. "Don't," said Luna quietly, "Harry has said he will not go with you," There was firmness in the quiet Ravenclaw that made it clear she spoke for them, "So, he will not go with you."

It was that moment from the movies, the classic Mexican standoff where the good guys and the bad guys stared each other down, waiting for somebody's trigger finger to get a little too itchy for its own good. Molly Weasley, prevented that when she erupted, ""Harry James Potter! Stop this nonsense immediately!"

Harry just stared at her, and said nothing, "Mrs. Weasley," he said firmly, "You have been the closest thing, to a real mother that I have ever known. However, I cannot." he shrugged, "I swear to you," his wave encompassed all of his friends, "I did not plan this."

Molly stared at her three children, and remembered how once upon a time she had been so proud that three of her children and Harry had called each other friends. Now she wondered whether that had really been such a good thing. Her screeched demand for them to lower their wands were met with polite, but firm refusal, and no wand

was lowered, "I'm sorry mum," said Ginny clearly, holding back her tears, "I...we've chosen. We're doing what is right."

Molly started crying, as Arthur looked thunderstruck. George looked at his mother, "We've chosen. Harry leaves over our dead bodies." The other five nodded firmly, resolute, "All of you who feel you're on the wrong side of the room, this is your time to declare. I know nobody here wants a fight, but if this kicks off," George shrugged, "It kicks off."

The ardent fervor of the adults in the room cooled, and wands wavered. Arthur held his wife close, listening to her sobs as three of her children stood ready to defend Harry Potter. Under age, risking prison, Azkaban, having their wand right revoked and death if it came to it. Arthur shook his head in disbelief, "What kind of child... man. What kind of man can command this level of not just loyalty, but respect?" he asked himself. "The entire world calls him crazy, yet they refuse to move. They stand by him."

Xenophilius Lovegood was the first to walk across the room without a backward glance. He paused next to his daughter, "Are you sure about this Lu? Do you understand what you are doing?"

"I do, dad, I do," she reassured him with the classic dreamy Luna smile on her face, "'Honor and Loyalty, before Profit.' Not your words, but it's still something you taught me." They hugged each other briefly, and he made his way over to Harry, holding out his hand, "Harry Potter." He said it as if he had just met an old friend in the street.

"Mr. Lovegood," said Harry, shaking the offered hand, "I'm..."

"No need to say anything," he said with a smile, "I know the truth about you. I believe you." Colin moved to the left, and Luna shuffled aside, creating space for her father, who stood alongside them. He was as carefree as his daughter was, and raised his wand, in an almost casual fashion, as if he was reaching out to shake a hand, but it was clear where he stood.

Ron Weasley fingered his wand idly as he stared in amazement at his family, as three of his brothers and sisters sided with his former friend. This actually played to his advantage, he realized as he pocketed his wand. Let his brothers and sisters stand with Harry. He

would stand by his parents, and he would be the one in a position to get everything when...

Remus met the eyes of Arthur and Molly Weasley, and he shrugged. He did not have much choice. Neither of the Weasley parents had a choice. Remus knew he owed it to his friends, to Sirius, to James. They crossed the room, to stand alongside Harry and his friends. The reunions were short but the point of it was that another three wands rose in Harry's defense, "Harry, perhaps now would be a good time, for a show of strength?" suggested Marinashka.

"Daharum Barak!" ordered Harry. The odd dozen or so bystanders shed their disillusionment, invisibility and other camouflage charms. The Order had brought twenty wands to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had eleven wands, fourteen goblin war axes and nine War Magi, all of them with the silver axe clutched in a red claw battle standard of the Axe Masters in full war gear lead by Senior Accounts Manager Griphook, the Commander in Chief of the Armies of the Bhazak Kha-Dorath.

Out gunned, out maneuvered and out played once again by a teenager. Dumbledore lowered his wand and pocketed it, and nodded to the gathered members of the Order. They were sighs of relief as they followed their leader's example, and the tension dissipated, evaporated as an ice cube chucked in a blazing fireplace. "Very well then Harry, perhaps we can, talk about this... in private."

Harry grunted and handed his wand to Griphook, "Hand your wand to one of your own."

"Surely Harry, that is not necessary..."

"Your wand!" barked Harry, his eyes blazing. It was taking every ounce of his self-control to keep himself from hexing the headmaster, "Give it to someone else. Otherwise, we skip negotiating and go to the burying." Even without a wand in his hand, he could channel enough raw magic to obliterate probably everyone in the room, on both sides. Dumbledore realized that he had no recourse but to comply.

A few minutes later, they took seats on opposite sides of a table in the Leaky Cauldron's private room, and Harry leveled his gaze upon the headmaster. Marinashka stood behind and a little to his left,

"What shall we start with Harry?" asked Dumbledore, amicably. There was, he felt, still some hope, if the boy was willing to talk.

"You know what I know, and so does my entire legal team," Dumbledore cringed ever so slightly at that, and Harry knew he had the headmaster right where he wanted him, "Bottom line: I don't trust you. I doubt I will ever again."

"You are willing to blackmail me Harry?"

"Yes. My demands are not negotiable, but I doubt you'd find them... unreasonable," said Harry, "There are two demands. The first is my emancipation. The paperwork was filed with the Ministry this morning, and there is one o'clock meeting with the Department of Family Services. You," he said calmly, "will support the petition."

"And if I refuse?"

"Marinashka?" she smiled and laid out the paperwork before the headmaster of Hogwarts. He studied the documents for a moment and could not believe that this was the boy that a year ago had looked up to him, trusted and idolized him, the great Albus Dumbledore. He read the document once, then a second time, realizing that it was a complete catalogue of names, dates, people, events and places for the past fifteen years. It began with his ignoring the last wishes of Lily and James Potter. Then hiding the Philosopher's Stone in a school, reckless endangerment of children, the incompetent defense professors, dereliction in his duties as headmaster, Severus Snape as Potions Professor, the charge of unwanted mental intrusion, the spells he had cast on Hermione Jane Granger, and charges of mind rape."You would do this Harry?" said Dumbledore quietly, "Fracture the side of the light? Divide us and hand Voldemort victory?"

Harry laughed, "I've read the history of the First War: The Light had to wait for an infant to fight and win for them. Fracture the light? Wake up! The Order of the Phoenix of those days was passive! Reactive! Useless! Worthless! You'd stun a god damn Death Eater in the hopes of reforming it in prison while the rest of the gue'la animals torture, rape and kill their way in to power!"

The headmaster frowned at the use of the curse. It was clear that Harry was spending too much time with the Goblins, "But they deserve a second chance..."

"They deserve nothing!" spat Harry, "Death in battle would at least grant them a measure of honor. Azakaban would be too kind! Getting a kiss from a Dementor, would still be too kind! They are worthless scum! And get this in to your head: They will all die."

"Where will you live for the rest of the summer?" he changed subject, hoping to give Harry a few moments to calm down, and to perhaps regain some control of the situation, "The Dursley's can be convinced to let you..."

"Good luck convincing them of anything," said Harry with a laugh, "My lawyers can confirm, and maybe I'll get them to write a note or something to let you know they're alive and well and do not want to have anything to do with me, magic or the wizarding world, ever again."

Dumbledore thought over everything he knew, about Harry, everything he had seen, all of his plans. All was lost now: Harry had taken the fateful step. He was walking the path Tom Marvolo Riddle had walked, so many years before. It had started out in a similar fashion. Tom had recruited his friends and made them his Death Eaters. Harry had recruited his friends as well, and had even turned several members of the Order against him. "It seems that I have no choice Harry," said the headmaster heavily, "I will be at the ministry this afternoon. I promise."

"Your word means nothing. Just be there." The meeting was over, and Harry turned and walked out, stopping in front of his friends, he noted the faces of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix as they left on foot, through the floo or by apparition. Once he was confident they were alone, he turned to his friends and asked, "Why?"

"You have fought for each us, all of us. I could say it's time to return the favor," said Ginny. There were nods all round, and Harry looked confused, "Chamber of Secrets," explained Ginny.

"Getting me out of Ravenclaw, showing me what friendship is supposed to be," said Luna.

"Making sure someone," Colin squeezed Luna's hand, "was there for me."

"Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," said Fred, "Our products are going to blow Zonko's away, partner."

"You own one-third of the business," said George, "And if you don't want it,"

"We'll hex you," they chorused, "We know some good ones now!" Harry cracked a smile.

"You gave me a chance to be... more than just a shadow in the background," said Neville, "You saw something in me, and believed in me, and you still do."

"All of you... thank you. I know, it couldn't have been easy for some of you to stand up the way you did," he was talking about the Weasleys and Luna, "How about lunch? I'll buy."

The meeting concluded, Dumbledore exited the Leaky Cauldron and with a thought, summoned Fawkes to him. With a flash of irritation, he called to the phoenix again; only to have his summons either unheard or ignored. With a flask of irritation he apparated to Privet Drive, emerging in the alley and to his shock, found that the wards around Number 4 were simply gone, with only the residual traces of magic to mark their presence.

He walked up to the front door, unchallenged as he knocked on the door and it swung open of its own accord. He entered cautiously, only to find that the heavy marks where furniture had once stood, a light patina of dust on the floor with the built in cupboards hanging open. Harry was right. There was no trace of the Dursleys or their belongings.

He drew his wand, "Illustro Semita," the globe of energy should have begun moving, and ideally, out the door towards wherever the Dursleys were living now. He stared, mouth open in surprise as it simply hovered for a few long moments and then dissipated in to nothingness. "Goblins," sighed the headmaster. If only there was a way, he could curb their influence, or remove it completely but he had no influence or way to influence the very insular Goblin Nation, let alone any one of its tribes. Dumbledore pulled his pocket watch

and frowned at the time. He did not have long before his presence was required at the Department of Family Services.

That afternoon, Harry stood with his lawyers once again, awaiting the arrival of Albus Dumbledore who arrived precisely on time. They knocked and a wizard ushered them in to the offices of the Department of Family Services where Director Sheppard awaited them and, as was her custom, got right down to business. "Good afternoon gentlemen. In the matter of Harry Potter's Emancipation, as filed by Marinshka Thaz-Dom on his behalf, this petition has already received the approval of your muggle guardians, a Vernon and Petunia Dursley. Mr. Potter, I have to ask what plans you have made for yourself regarding accommodation and so forth."

"Director Sheppard," Harry began, "I plan to finish my summer holidays where I currently reside: Gringotts, with Griphook and Marinashka Thaz-Dom, who have opened not only their home but their hearts to me." Harry gave Dumbledore a look that would have frozen water. "I will be returning to Hogwarts to complete my OWLs, and then later on my NEWTs. I am currently searching for a property to call my own home."

Melinda Sheppard nodded. It was clear that Harry had thought his through, and had covered most of his bases right off the bat, "Albus, do you have anything to add?"

The headmaster eyed Harry for a long moment and wondered whether Harry would go through with his threat, if Dumbledore blocked this petition. However, he knew what would happen and simply could not risk it. "I have nothing to add. I do not oppose this petition."

"There appears to be no reason why your petition should not be granted. The fact that you will be at Hogwarts to complete your OWLs is certainly influencing my decision, as is your current living arrangements," she said, "However," she produced a length of parchment, "I received this from the Misuse of Magic Office, Mr. Potter," he nodded. He had wondered whether this would come up and now he knew. He glanced at Dumbledore but the headmaster said nothing, "Can you explain it?"

Wordlessly, Harry held his wand to his temple, "Repeto memoria" he said. The memory floated and took shape and form. It began with

Harry's last words to a defeated Dudley Dursley, and Harry froze the replay, "That, is my cousin after having the stuffing beaten out of him," he met director Sheppard's gaze and held it, "I won't deny that I administered the beating. But, the Ministry has no say over muggle affairs, especially when no magic was involved." He resumed the playback, showing the arrival of the pair of Dementors, and himself summoning the Patronus to drive the creatures away. "That is why you hold that waste of parchment in your hand, Director," said Harry simply, "I saved his life, and probably the lives of a number of muggles and ensured that our world stays a secret from them. If anything, I upheld the Statute of Secrecy."

It was enough for her, "Mr. Potter, you are hereby granted adult status in our world. Just bear in mind that you are still a minor in the muggle world and that we have no jurisdiction over what events transpire there. You will, however still have to attend the hearing at the end of August..."

Harry wondered if she was perhaps hinting at the "educating" of Dudley, but a wave of her wand cast a duplication charm, making copies for the Department, the ministry archives, Dumbledore and Harry, "Thank you, Director Sheppard," said Harry, shaking hands with the Director. He walked out, Marinashka at his side only to come face to face with the headmaster, "What?"

"Harry," said Dumbledore, very cautious, "Is there any way we can discuss what to do about the disciplinary hearing?"

Harry simply shook his head, "I have legal counsel." The corridor was like that of any muggle office building, except for tubes filled with scrolls that zipped back and forth overhead, in and out of elevators. Otherwise, it was the daily ebb and flow of ministry employees going back and forth.

"Harry, be reasonable ..." he was talking to air as Harry had left, and had entered the elevators leading back in to muggle London. Dumbledore knew that the coming year was going to test him in many ways.

"I would suppose," said Marinashka, "that you are going to celebrate your victory?" Harry nodded, "Just do not do so by beating up your cousin again," she warned him.

"Nah," he replied, "Over and done with. I will not be home for dinner tonight, I have, something I have to do."

She grinned, "I hear French..." she raised an eyebrow suggestively and Harry laughed as the doors chimed and they walked out of the phone booth together.

"A gentleman never tells," were his last words on the subject to her, given that there was not much to tell.

Chapter 28

Trunks, Truths and Promises

Harry had never said anything to Griphook, or anyone else about his reconnection with Fleur. It was partly because he had no interest in sharing her, however ridiculous that sounded – even to him. Their friendship was forged from something that made them both unique individuals. His was Voldemort's accident at his birth. Hers was what she was born as. Half blood and half Veela strolled down the street in the late afternoon sun, struggling to burn through the smog of London. "Harry Potter," she said by way of greeting, "You said you would owl," she hesitated, "I honestly did not think that you would."

"I try to keep my word," he said easily, reading the unease in her eyes, "and forgive the mistakes that friends make, especially when they don't know the whole truth."

She relaxed, "so where would we be going this afternoon? Ice cream, coffee and then dinner?" the French lilt was perhaps the most attractive thing about just her voice, but then, the rest of her was definitely attractive. It made the vowels and consonants roll. He mentally slapped himself before his thoughts wandered in completely the wrong direction.

"Whatever you desire," he said with the slightest of bows.

Her smile, it was clear she was playing with him, "Perhaps, we should go shopping?" Shopping... the terror torture tactic that every woman uses to gauge, assess and evaluate a man.

Harry glanced at his watch, and then raised an eyebrow, "I suppose I could do with some new clothes."

"Why? You are cute enough as it is," she retorted, as she offered him her arm.

He took it, linking hers with his as he snorted, "Cute?" he was seriously, deadly serious for a moment, as he ran a hand through his untamable hair. "That is precisely the reason I need a new wardrobe. I have a Dark Lord and his Death Eater minions to exterminate. I can't do that looking cute. I need to pull off angry and brooding, intimidating even."

"You've changed, Harry," she said quietly, almost whispering to him, "Cute you are. And I'm not sure I want to help destroy that." He tensed when she flicked the braided length of hair behind his ear, "you just don't look like the boy who defies Dark wizards, more like a Quidditch player just off the pitch."

They were standing on the sidewalk, somewhere in muggle London. Harry had no idea where, but he did not care as he looked up in to the sky for a moment. He was gone, she realized. She had seen it, so many times during the long nights after the third task. He was staring at something only he could see, some memory – more likely some nightmare – which he would not share with anyone. Though with Voldemort, Hermione, and Cedric, she thought bitterly, she could guess.

They walked in silence, Fleur leading them through the streets she was somewhat familiar with, heading towards the bright lights of the London shopping scene that kept going until the latter hours of the evening. They walked through the city together, not saying anything at all. She knew what he was like, when living through the nightmares while awake. She wondered sometimes, if things would have been different if it had been her, instead of Hermione that had captivated him and taken his heart so thoroughly. She knew it was a non-starter. Harry Potter was still in love with his Hermione, and nothing she could do could change that and she was part Veela. She would never, could never settle for second place.

They stopped for a light snack, and he picked up the thread of their conversation as if ten minutes of silence had not passed between them, "So, young and cute is something that works for French girls?" he raised his eyebrow suggestively

Fleur laughed, "But of course! Older men assume too much, are too set in their ways to change. They want a certain thing and they try to change women to meet those expectations, instead of accepting us as who, or what we are." Her hair trailed out behind in a gentle breeze. Harry was not sure if she was being honest or teasing him, and he found himself wondering about it, "But I am just under two years older than you."

She laughed as they walked. Fleur played tour guide a little, as they walked along the streets. The sun had set and the lighting gave everything a somewhat peaceful, slightly magical feel to everything.

Maybe there was something in the air, "teenage hormones," mused Harry, and the people were friendly. They stopped along half a dozen stores including muggle specialties stores, all of which were there to cater to tourists. Harry and Fleur definitely fit the bill. More than one couple, a number of men and a few women paused as Fleur walked by; arms linked with Harry, laughing at something he had said, all to admire her undeniable, magical beauty.

With the contents of his vault at his fingertips, he let Fleur pick out some pieces of clothing from several pricy stores, including Harrods, holding him to his promise to start a new wardrobe, all paid for by the Gringotts credit card. There was no sign of the magical world in London, and in a quiet store at the higher end of the high street that smelled of new leather, Fleur upped the game, getting him to stand while they fitted him for a dark suit, matching shoes and overcoat. The inside pocket read Armani. There was several thousand pounds of extravagance and Fleur insisted. He did not mind, spending the money or the time. It was worth it to him. "You are sure about this?" asked Fleur, "I know muggle fashion is a century ahead of the wizarding world and that suit does look magnificent on you."

"Look more like a dark mysterious brooding gentleman than cutesy Quidditch player?" He asked with a smile. She nodded and Fleur's reflection in the mirror gave him a subtle smile, "Guess I'll take it." They walked, shopped a little more but invariably they returned to Diagon Alley, where once again, he escorted her to the front door of the building. She hesitated and before she could get away, Harry had embraced her. It was a quick hug, at least it was supposed to be before the smells of a spring rain and apples overwhelmed him. One of her hands settled on his back and she relaxed in to the embrace.

He held her longer than polite friendship, even close friendship would have allowed, and he was still the first one to pull away. His eyes were readable to her, like an open book. He was at war with himself, about his feelings, for her, for Hermione. She shook her head ever so slightly. Perhaps, she dared hope; perhaps there could be something more than just friendship between them someday, if he was ready.

"What did you say?" he asked. With a start, she realized that she had said the last aloud instead of just thinking it.

"Coffee?" she said, the first thing that popped in to her head. She was not sure if he bought the line, as he stepped back from her, "Places to be?" he nodded, "When can I... we..."

He smiled, "Owl me." He turned and walked down the street towards the bank and did everything he could, to keep from looking back over his shoulder at her, standing on the top step, door half-open. An invitation if there ever was one.

She stared at his retreating form and recalled something her mother had once told her, "Remember, it is not the ones that look back when they leave, but those that do not look back when trying their hardest to look. Those are who want you, for you. Not because of what you are." He did not look back, but she could see it, in him, the way he half twitched, and tensed, fighting the urge. He needed time to come to terms with things. She needed it too. She turned and walked inside, and Harry caught the barest glimpse of her, before she vanished and cursed himself. If only... if "ifs" were wishes...

A pattern repeated itself for the next week. They had lunch and dinner together, never really saying much of anything important. They grew close but there was always something holding the two of them back from one another. They met for dinner, they went shopping - mostly window-shopping, and they spent time together. They talked about everything and nothing.

Harry's friends accepted her presence without comment as they began to just, "hang out" together, welcoming her back in to the fold as it were, strengthening the friendship that they had built the year before. Sometimes all of them were there, other times just a few but the constant presence beside a glamour wearing Harry, was Fleur. Harry was not sure if she was teasing or genuinely jealous that she had not been there when Harry knocked Dumbledore and the rest of his precious Order down a few pegs. There was laughter, happy memories and good time, but at the back of everyone's mind, Voldemort was out there. The question was what exactly he was doing. The more immediate concern was Colin Creevey. There was a hard edge to the young teenager and Luna had done her best to help him through his own personal hell. However, what else could they do for him? Nothing. He had not opened up to any of them, and not even Luna could get him to talk.

Harry's trial before the Wizengamot was only a week away and he was not worried about it. The facts would speak for him, and if that were not enough, he would worry about that bridge when he came to it. He sat back from the table in the ice cream parlor as his friends laughed as each of them sprouted antlers or feathers or in Neville's case, a very fine pair of wings. Even Colin had laughed, when he had sprouted a small pair of horns.

Harry just absorbed it all, taking it all in. It snuck up on him suddenly, almost as if his occulemency could not contain the memories, hopes and dreams from a past life, of Hermione of how they would be together, having ice cream, wandering through Flourish and Blotts together. His thoughts turned to Crookshanks for a moment. He wondered how the demented creature was adjusting to life without Hermione. Sure, Griphook and Marinashka had not minded her, as she tended to stay in his room most of the time, and that she was smarter than the average feline that avoided many problems - except for Crookshanks and Hedwig going at it with fang and claw every now and again - often over who got the warmest spot in the room.

He realized that there were number of things left on his to do list, and as he glanced around the table at his friends, he realized now, was a good time as any, "Let's go," he said, "there's something that needs doing." With Harry leading the way, disguised as he always were, they drew a few glances and a couple of stares as they wandered towards the far end of the alley

"Harry, I hope you don't plan on taking me home so early in the afternoon," said Fleur.

"Not unless you want to," he said, "Have I been that boring today?" There was a breakout of laughter, as Harry led them. They were on the edge of Knockturn Alley and it had them all slightly on edge, but nobody had reached for a wand as they slipped in to the alley itself.

Knockturn Alley was an odd place. Granted it was darker and had a slighter meaner atmosphere, but it was much like its Diagon Alley counterpart, but also boasted a number of knick-knack and miscellaneous item stores. There also seemed to be an inordinate number of stores dealing with animals and familiars of all kinds. "Knockturn Alley," said Fleur, "whatever does not have a place in a store in Diagon Alley, you can find it here."

"And you know this, how?" asked Luna dreamily.

"I work for Gringotts." She answered calmly as they crossed in to "Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment" after their circuit of the infamous Knockturn Alley. Wiseacre's was located literally on the edge between Diagon and Knockturn, and when looking around the store, it seemed that things got more bizarre, abnormal and darker as you stared from the side of the store in Diagon Alley towards its other half.

The store was not overly larger, perhaps the size of Harry and Fleur's favourite ice cream parlor, and what Harry had brought them here to buy was stacked in the middle of store. "Like the arrangement?" Seven wands rose, four shields were cast and two stunners were ready to fly in those few moments, "All right, then, I'll stop surprising my customers." He was a wizard, perhaps in his mid to late forties, "Harry? You mind?"

Harry chuckled, "Look on the bright side: Nobody hexed you."

"This time!" snapped the proprietor, "When you came in here two weeks ago, I was walking out of the backroom," he was clearly enjoying telling the tale to his audience of six wands, "tea tray, a selection of snacks, hoping to read the Quibbler. I dropped the sugar tongs and woke up with the mother of all headaches!"

"Yeah. Yeah," said Harry, "You got a headache in an exchange for a lot of business and a bone china tea set." The others relaxed. Clearly, the man was a friend or acquaintance of some sort. "So how's tricks Gerard?"

"Haven't been hexed in two weeks," he replied.

"You're never going to let me live that down are you?"

"I was hexed by the trunk shopping Harry Potter? Would be great for business if it wasn't for the shit in the Prophet."

Fleur cottoned on almost immediately, "How are the banking relations?"

"It shows, or you work for them," muttered Gerard, "Doing well." He turned to the surprised teenagers, "One quarter Goblin on my grandmother's side." He became all business as he led them in to the basement, "Shall we?"

"Prepared as you asked," he explained when they were standing before a collection of ten matte black trunks, "Seven compartments in each. Two regular compartments and the other five compartments make up an apartment inside. All empty and devoid of furniture for the moment," he handed out a selection of catalogues, "Pick and choose what you like - later." Gerard continued his spiel: Basically the trunks were dragon hide and charmed against most hexes, spells, curses, proofed against water, flame and boasted a number of very impressive security features. "Can't be moved when you're inside it, and anyone trying to access it without your permission is in for nasty surprises of increasing lethality that culminate in a long stay in St. Mungos. You shrink them or enlarge them with their own charms so you can use them all the time. "

"Did you get those other features I wanted working?"

"The intertrunk systems?" he hesitated, "Sorta. I've got communications and a floo network between the trunks but connections to the outside are unstable. The... self-destruct, works just fine. You set your own phrase and counter phrase, just like you wanted." Gerard handed Harry what looked like a stack of leaflets, "User guide for each trunk."

It was a crash course in their use and operation and Harry was clearly setting them up for something: Something big as they shrunk their new trunks and pocketed their own trunks. They made their way back in to safer territory and their ice cream parlor. Their customary table was available and the moment they were comfortable, and had placed their orders, Harry cast a number of charms, giving them complete privacy, "Here's how it goes, everyone," he said simply, "All of you, have been there for me or fought for me. Now, I want to take that to the next level: War is coming. You all know that. I want us, ready." He held up a hand, not that there was a need to placate his rapt audience, "I will show you, what I'm working on, what I'm trying to create. If you want out, I will ask you three questions, and then you can walk away. Simple. Clean. So for the moment, are you, with me?"

The portkey dropped them off in the garden of a large manor house, "Where are we?" The grounds seem to extend for miles in every direction, and they could just make out the walls, imposing ones almost a kilometer and a half away.

"Somewhere In Scotland," Harry replied, "I don't exactly know where but I trust my, supplier."

"Goblins," sang Luna with a wink. Harry just smiled as Crookshanks trotted out of the house with Blake in tow. The man whistled and Hedwig flapped her way from somewhere to land on Harry's shoulder.

"Welcome, I suppose," said Harry, "to Headquarters." He took a moment to stroke her feathers and she ruffled them with some measure of pride, "Missed you too girl."

"Headquarters of what?" asked Fleur.

Blake answered with a chuckle, "Not got a name for it yet. We'll be looking for suggestions though." He led through the building, and they realized quickly that it was the headquarters for a military organization. He did not say as much but when you have rooms with weapon racks, the equivalent of the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, training rooms, and what would eventually be a Security Control Center, it was clear what it all was for. The tour ended in a room setup like a muggle cinema, and the lighthearted nature of the tour vanished, as Blake nodded to Harry and excused himself, "I've got some paperwork to deal with."

Gone was the somewhat happy and cheerful teenager. In its place was someone dark, serious and brooding, standing next to a Pensieve, "What I'm about to show you..." he hesitated, already having second thoughts, already uncertain, "What you are about to see is what happened, that night." They knew the night in question. How could they not? "It is not nice, it is not pleasant," he hesitated, "You will see Voldemort's rebirth. I will not... hide the truth. Voldemort, is evil in a way that you have never heard about, evil in ways you have never read about. I will show you that the depths of his cruelty know no limits. Nothing is sacred to him. Nothing!" Harry was bitter, "I won't lie to any of you. You follow me, and death may be the end result."

He pulled a version of that memory from the "restricted section" of his mind and deposited it in the Pensieve. It was not the normal silver, just a black thread with red splotches. He showed them, everything. They saw it all, as he had through his eyes. More than once, they looked away from the screen, unable to stomach what it showed. Somehow, hearing it without seeing it was even worse. Neville was bone white and shaking. Colin was frozen in his seat. The twins seemed to take turns, watching and then looking away. Ginny had tried and her stomach had heaved repeatedly until she finally lost. Luna watched it all and was the calmest of them all. Just, calmly accepting what they were up against, what they would fight against.

What had lasted for hours in reality, he had compressed, allowing them to watch it in minutes. Still, the damage was done. Fleur was holding his hand, tightly and would no doubt have difficulty letting go for a few minutes. When it was over, she was the first to ask, "Who knows, about this?"

He hesitated for a long moment before answering. The memory he had shown them left out a very important detail: His exchange with Dumbledore, the spells he had used on Hermione. His council of advisors had fought hard and he had finally caved to their logic and reason, to avoid shattering the side of light in the face of overwhelming darkness. "A goblin, my godfather Blake, Remus and now, all of you," he answered quietly. "I won't deny it. I've pulled a fast one on all of you." He faced them, "This is it. You want to walk away, now is the time. Speak up and I won't think any less of you. I don't want any of you following me because you think you have to. I want you with me because you think it is the right thing to do."

"Why show us this Harry?" asked Fleur quietly, "Why?"

"I made a promise, a long time ago, that night on the Quidditch Pitch, that somebody would give you the details, the truth." A stray tear escaped from the corner of Harry's eye, "I, keep my promises." It's what Hermione would have wanted - that last he thought to himself.

"You were, you are not ready to share this," observed Luna.

"But if you're not ready," began Fred.

"Why share it?" asked George.

"I'm asking you to prepare for war. I am asking you to prepare to fight. I am asking you, perhaps sooner than you think, to be prepared to kill. I cannot ask you for that, unless your eyes are well and truly open." He stared off in to the distance for a long moment, "When it comes to battle, to fighting for your life. Stunners and incapacitation are not an option. You fight to kill. You have to if you want to survive."

"My eyes are open," growled Colin, "When do we get to kill some Death Eaters?" The youngest present, was too young for such things, but all withheld comment. They were joined by tragedy, different tragedies perhaps but all with a common root cause: Voldemort.

"...when do, how do we, begin?" asked Neville. He clapped Colin on the shoulder, "I have as much reason to fight as you do." That cryptic remark raised one question for many of those gathered: What? However, as far as Harry was concerned, this was neither the time nor the place.

"Fight," said Luna, "Against such evil, standing idly by and doing nothing is the same as helping it."

"Fight!" said Neville.

"Fight!" echoed Ginny

It was decided in moments, "In this to the end," said the twins, "Any bloody end."

Seven teenagers were in agreement about what was coming, and what they would have to do. Now, all they had to do was name this, something. They left by portkey, returning to the ice cream parlor where Florean Fortescue was contemplating giving them a group discount. They tossed out names, started writing them down, and eventually began to whittle down the legion of names. They had narrowed it down to a handful when they realized the time: They all had places to be with family and friends except for Harry and Fleur.

The trunks were given out, one to each of them with a few simple words, "Read the manual, learn the charms, set that self destruct,"

he said, "These need to be kept secure because if one is breached, all of our trunks will not be secure."

"You know something we don't Harry?"

"Let's just say that the real Mad- Eye Moony would be impressed with exactly how paranoid I'm becoming." They said their farewells and parted, leaving Fleur and Harry alone at the table, "Must be nice being able to spend a few days away from work," said Harry, "and not worry about getting in trouble with the boss."

"Griphook was very clear Harry," she said softly, "You need your friends, and besides," she shrugged with a smile, "It is an internship. Most of it is parchment work these days. I can work nights, even from my apartment if I want to." She stood up and extended her hand to him, "Would you care to see it?"

"Your office or your apartment?" he said as he drained his drink and set the glass on the table.

"My apartment," she cuffed him gently on the back of the head, "Why on earth would I want to take you to my office? I share it with two Goblins and a Wizard!"

"Lead the way."

Chapter 29

Romance

Fleur's apartment was not overly large: Two rooms, a bathroom and a small en-suite kitchenette. What was clear however was the amount of time she had spent in making it in to a home, even if she was only planning to be in England for another year.

It was an open space as well with the only divisions between the bedroom and the rest were shimmering gossamer fabrics of perhaps curtains. The walls were a light sea blue color, like those of a calm sea, accented by white baseboards and shutters like clouds in the sky. The furniture was a mix of browns and earthy tones. It was a place of calm, relaxed tranquility, where you could shed your deadlines, timetables and other plans. The wooden pecan colored floor somehow served to keep the place grounded. "Deep thoughts, positive thinking to face life's uncertainties?" asked Harry.

"Well, you had a Goblin fashion consultant," she countered, teasingly, "I had a goblin interior designer."

"Makes you wonder what it is the Goblin's don't do well," he said with a laugh as Fleur disappeared in to the kitchen to make some coffee.

"No sugar no milk?" asked Fleur, "And they only do things poorly if it is possible that they cannot profit from it!"

"Black," he confirmed, "Like my heart," he muttered to himself.

"A black hole maybe," he blinked, did she just teleport from the kitchen? "But there is hope that someone, someday can fill that void in your life," Her hands were filled with two cups of steaming coffee.

"Is that extraordinary hearing a Veela thing?" he asked, discreetly giving her the once over from head to toe. It was not the first time he'd caught himself doing it, and he was pretty sure it was not the first time she'd caught him doing it either.

"No," she handed him the cup, and he sipped it appreciatively, "that unnaturally sharp hearing is something I got from my mother." She collapsed on to one end of the sofa and beckoned to him.

"She must have be quite a woman," he said wistfully, "You got the best of wizard and Veela in your, and as part of a family." He almost sat down on the sofa but shifted at the last possible moment to land on the single seat facing her, "I would know something about dysfunctional families."

"Dysfunctional families?" she laughed, "There is no such thing as a perfectly normal family that has it all perfect. We're, all victims of that," she said, "It's just that some of us are victims of something different, but regardless we are all victims of something."

"Except that we are victims of something different," countered Harry, "What binds us together, as friends, here and now, is what we have lived through. Nobody else can understand it, not in the way we can."

They sat, quietly, for a few minutes, considering their words to one another, wondering where that exactly placed the two of them. Finally, Fleur set her empty mug down on the table, "You want to go for a swim?"

"You have a pool?" he asked suspiciously, "Here?"

"Not here, but I know your... place has one." She answered smoothly, almost slyly, letting that damnably delectable French accent slip through as she smiled, and it really did light up the room.

"Get a grip!" growled Harry in his head, "Just. Get. A. Grip!" He was not sure if she was playing with him or not, he was not sure if he really wanted to know. However, he knew that he was going to have a challenge dealing with Fleur Delacour in any kind of bathing suit.

"Don't think you can handle the sight of me Harry?" she teased.

"Get a grip!" Harry thought again but he could not help it when his mind wandered towards getting a grip of something, of someone, of her. He slapped himself mentally. She was beyond teasing him, at this point; she was openly flirting with him. He took it in stride and grabbed her around the waist, "Let's go!" then vanished from her apartment in a swirl of colors, light and magic.

With Harry and Fleur making their way upon wings of magic to his... estate, other things were afoot at the Weasley family's home, on the outskirts of Ottery St. Catchpole in Devon, known simply as "The Burrow" has always been more than a slightly odd construction. However given the size of the family that was no real surprise. Dilapidated with its seven floors, magic is literally the only thing that keeps it standing upright.

Nestled amongst rolling hills and fertile meadows, the gnome-infested garden saw three of the Weasley children, in conversation about one thing and the betting pool was growing rather large. "Before we get back to Hogwarts," said Ginny, tossing a handful of Sickles and Knuts on the pile.

"Before his trial next week," replied Fred, matching his sister's money.

"Before the end of the week," countered George, exceeding both their bets with a Galleon.

"We're pathetic aren't we?" said Ginny, "Betting on how long it takes the two of them to just fess up and admit what they feel for each other?"

"It can't be easy for either of them though," remarked Fred, "I mean, you know... he showed us what happened that night, how... everything happened, with Cedric and, Hermione."

"You don't get over that sort of thing overnight," agreed George.

"I know, but he needs more than any of us, can give him," said Ginny, almost wistfully, and the twins grinned.

"You're not still hoping to one day snare yourself the last of the Potters are you, Gin-Gin?" they chorused. Ginny turned that classic rose red shade and the twins, renewed the offensive. Their offensive however went a little too far as she unleashed her patented hex that had both red haired twins running for their lives around the garden, much to the amusement of Ron who had been sent to gather them for some damn errand or another. He just did not care.

Ron had not exactly had a very good summer. He had been at odds with his parents, alienated in his own home virtually his entire family.

Truth be told, he was left wondering whether he should go and talk to stuck up Black Sheep Percy. He had wanted to visit his... friends, but his parents had not given him permission. He was still being punished for what had happened the year before, he just knew it. He makes new friends and suddenly, he had become the pariah. It was not fair! He had spent a lot of his time thinking about the past year, about everything, especially about what Harry had said to him during the only two real conversations that he and Harry had shared. He had no idea what he could do to fix the situation, with his friends in Slytherin, or with his former friends in Gryffindor, "Oi!" he shouted, "mum wants you lot for something!" message delivered he stalked off. What did he care if they didn't listen to him?

At a manor house far to the North, the witch and wizard arrived in the foyer of the mansion with only the faintest of pops. He held on to Fleur a moment longer than necessary but still let go before it would seem...inappropriate. Dobby and Winky where there in moments, greeted the pair and then popped back to whatever they were doing. Fleur could not help but ask, "What is Blake doing?"

"Good point," Harry mused as he whistled. Hedwig flapped her way in to the room and it took Harry only a moment to conjure quill and parchment, and send Hedwig on her way, "Blake suddenly has the evening off," he said with a rouges grin. She laughed as they made their way down to the pool

"You didn't give me time to pack anything," Fleur mock pouted, "but I'm sure I can transfigure something... maybe..."

It was, strange, the way the friendship and laughter, suddenly, seemed to just...die... they were sitting on the edge of the pool, both of them doing nothing more than taking in the sunset when finally she asked him, "Harry, we just can't be friends, can we?"

Silence was the only answer he had to that question. He knew what she was talking about, she knew he knew, and given their past, their first "real" conversation had been her attempted seduction of him, to get him away from Hermione. "Do you really want to go there, Fleur?" he asked, quietly.

She shook her head, "Not so much a matter of whether I want to. You know what I am, you know, how, Veela... are... non? It is not as if we can control it, as fully as we would like," she admitted

"So, it is because I'm single..." he muttered, meeting her gaze for the first time, "isn't it?" she nodded. "So we can't be friends," he said, "Because you are the epitome of hotness, and I'm... me." He joked weakly, "And I..." he just stared, "You've got an insane smile..."

She smiled just a little more, and he saw the faintest tinge of rose in her cheeks. If she was the epitome of hotness before, he had no idea what she was now. "In a league of her own, you idiot," he thought, "Where she always has been." He mentally slapped himself, again, trying, to stay on topic, "We can be friends... for now... Fleur... I don't know if..."

She rose to her feet, not in anger, but more out of frustration. She had done all she could, to avoid him, put distance between them. London and Hogwarts should have been far enough! Instead, he had Flooed and come out at her feet instead! There were few things she wanted, needed, more in her life. Not because she chose it, but because the Veela had chosen for her and she just had to live with the consequences of that. Her curse, she thought bitterly, "At least Harry knows what to do with his accursed destiny."

He was standing next to her, closer than they had ever been before, "Fleur?" he whispered.

She took a step back from him, and smiled, "I'm going for a swim," she smoothly stripped of her top and shimmied out of her jeans in a single fluid motion that left Harry agape, "You coming?" she dove in

"Fleur Isabelle Delacour," Harry muttered with a shake of his head, "You're lucky I'm so far past beyond the point of no return, that I have no idea what it looks like, or where it was." A flick of his hand brought his wand in to his hand from its holster on his wrist, a cutting charm his own shirt lay on the edge of the pool followed by his jeans. He dived in after her.

Fleur had felt that rush, the emotions of desire, and lust that radiated of Harry and smiled as she surfaced on the far side of the pool. The feelings were there, the feelings were mutual. If he was feeling it, so was she, but how far could she push him. This was supposed to be

the savior of the wizarding world - or at least the British wizarding world - and he could not handle her? She drew her wand from its holster and wordless cast two spells. The first transfigured her underwear in to the same bikini she had worn the previous summer at the beach in St. Tropez with her extended family. Her second spell conjured up a simple air mattress with a backrest before clambering on to it.

She was dripping wet and the water was cooler than she expected, but she did not mind the water's effects on her, since it would hopefully have a similar effect on Harry. She cast a few warming charms on herself, and waited for him to catch up. He surfaced close by, but she had her back to him, "I would have liked one of them too you know?" he swam round to face her and it took him several long seconds to start breathing again as he took in the sight before him. And it was truly, almost all of her.

The bikini was not exactly the of the modest variety, and he found himself wondering how on Earth it was possible that bikinis could come that small and still hide everything they were supposed to, yet leave so much fertile ground for the imagination, "is that... even legal?" he stuttered

"Of course Harry," she said in that seductive drawl of hers, combining her French accent with the merest hint of her charm, "Many of the beaches in France allow women to go topless, if not completely nude, to avoid those unsightly tan lines." Harry just studied her, hungrily. Moreover, she did not mind, enjoying the hunger in his eyes that followed every curve of her, "Like what you see?" she purred.

It took a long minute for her words to click in his brain, and even though he had felt both pulses of that Veela allure, he knew he was resistant to it. That did little to change his reaction or response: Yes. He liked what he saw, and he wanted her.

He pushed away from the air mattress and dove, going underneath the air mattress like a shark and tipped her over. She managed one "Eep!" of surprise before she was in the water. The pool was only a meter deep where they were but she floundered for a few seconds before strong, callused hands grabbed her arms and steadied her, against a warm body. Suddenly, she was kissed and kissed hard.

They pulled together in the water, something about her saving him, or him saving her. Neither one needing saving from the other, but they both did need saving, in different ways. She felt good under his hands, hard muscle underneath soft skin. Everything was suddenly right with their world, even if it would only stay that way for a few minutes. It was enough; it would be enough for the moment. It had taken just a little to push him over the edge, as it were, but he had caught her and dragged her down in to the abyss with him.

She did not care, as far as he was concerned, he had done her a favor. Harry was not sure whom, but there was a bubblehead charm surrounding them, and it meant that they did not have to stop. Just as well, it was unlikely that they would have.

All of it was driving him wild, had driven him wild, he wanted her... needed her. His hands roamed across her back and wandered lower, pulling her close to him, and she obliged, her legs wrapping around his back, pulling them as close as possible as they broke the surface. Somehow, without letting go, they had propelled themselves to the edge of the pool where a flight of stairs would let them walk, or stumble out.

Neither of them were sure how they made it out of the pool, and back in the mansion, in their tangle of limbs and passion, but Harry was not going to bother with the waiting, not for this, not like this. He managed to focus himself, just long enough to apparate both of them, in to one of the furnished but never used bedrooms but his aim was more than a little off as they crash to the floor.

It was that unfortunately landing that broke them apart, as they both lay facing each other, out of breath. There were flames in her eyes, he realized, and for a moment, he could not help but notice just those eyes, the fire, and the raw nakedness of passion.

He hesitated for a long moment, and in that instant, the spell was broken. However, for her it was not. She closed the narrow gap between them and kissed him, hungrily, and the blast of raw sexual energy came as a slap. He pulled away from her, scrambling to his feet, putting some distance between them. "Fleur..." he breathed, "I can't do this."

"Cannot or will not?" she growled, as she stretched out a hand towards him, "You know full well what it is you want." She smiled,

but it was a brittle smile, "I've seen you, looking at me, wanting me." Harry watched her hands carefully, wondering if he was about to see shades of that Veela temper. All they did was tiptoe a line up her side, and around her neck, "You know what you want. Why don't you just take it?" she took a step forward, like a cougar on the hunt, "why don't you? When I'm willing to give it to you?"

Harry contemplated his choices: He could run. He could try to talk her in to calming down, even though he knew full well that he himself needed a long cold shower, or he could tell her the truth. "Fleur, please..." he resorted to begging instead, "I don't know if I'm...ready..." he whispered the last word, barely loud enough for her to hear it, "I know you, and I know what it means. But if you love me, even as half as much as you want me..." he hesitated, knowing that bringing up the past was not the right way to calm her down. "You won't push... me; us in to this... you won't force this, and push me away."

There are many ways to deflate a balloon. Let out too much air too fast and you risk losing the balloon. You need to let the air out slowly, and he breathed a sigh of relief. It had worked, he hoped.

Water had dripped, and soaked the carpet under foot but he was still attractive, so damn desirable to her, whether he was the windswept Quidditch player, the dark brooding man of mystery or, this soaking wet teenager fighting a war between his head, heart and hormones over whether or not to give her what she wanted. However, he had found the weakness in her armor, and had driven home through that chink. Veela are what they are. She wanted him. She could have him now, and lose him forever or wait... and have him, forever. There was no choice. She took a deep breath, to calm herself, and it took several of those breathes to extinguish the flames of desires.

He breathed a sigh of relief. That fire in her eyes was gone, replaced by something else. He was not sure if it was guilt, pain, or a mix of both. However, whatever it was she felt, it worked, and he breathed a little easier, "Why can't I just... have, what I want?"

"Because I can't give it to you," he said quietly. "Because... I can't let go of the past. Because even though, I can control my nightmares, I can't block them out. They still... haunt me."

The silence between them stretched on, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, she nodded, "Should I leave?" she whispered.

"Yes, No!" he said, "Stay," he hesitated, "I...I'm not ready for that, but I could..."

"I know," she interrupted him smoothly, "I know," she stepped towards the bathroom, "I'll get ready and perhaps we can go, for dinner?"

He smiled at her, "It's a date. Anything but Italian," he added suddenly. She smiled back and slipped from the room, and Harry blinked, "I didn't see you bring anything..."

"Mr. Potter," she laughed, "I'm a woman, and a witch. If I have a wand, I have everything I need!" Harry chuckled, he was about to apparate when she tossed the question out, "Ever had Japanese food?"

"No," he admitted, "But, I suppose I'll try anything once..." Harry made his way out of the room for a shower – a short sharp and arctic cold one.

In Little Haggleton, Riddle Manor had undergone some much needed cleaning, repairs and maintenance but large portions of it were still in their dilapidated state. The Death Eaters had only cleaned out those areas that they themselves and their Lord used regularly - why waste the effort after all? They had plans on dominating Britain, and then perhaps the world! When their conquest was complete, they would have all the squib and muggle slave labor to do the cleaning without magic.

The burning of the Dark Mark had summoned only a few of the Death Eaters to their master's side: Peter Pettigrew, as rat-faced as ever, was the first to answer the summons as he was never far from his master. A number of others arrived and Lucius Malfoy was the last one to arrive, standing behind his seat at the right hand of his master.

"I am sorry for my delay my Lord," he said smoothly, "I was engaged with the manager of the Daily Prophet, and have ensured that both Potter and Dumbledore will have their names and reputations dragged through the mud for the foreseeable future."

"You have done well then, Lucius," said Voldemort conversationally, "Be seated, for we have much to discuss, regarding our special project."

The five Death Eaters were the only five involved in the project, "What progress have you made?" asked the Dark Lord, politely, almost conversational as he sipped his wine.

"We progress well, my Lord," said Pettigrew quietly, "We have managed to stabilize the basic process, and have had some limited success in more complicated... replication." He gestured towards the two other Death Eaters seated at the table, "They have been able to create human forms, but they are but mere shells, without mind or soul."

"So you progressed upon schedule?"

"Thus far my Lord," confirmed Pettigrew, "But I feel, that I must respectfully remind you, that such a blend of alchemy, magic and... muggle science... nothing can be guaranteed. All we can do is provide..." the curse slammed him backwards in his chair, as pain flared across his skin and set his nerves ablaze.

"Lord Voldemort," he hissed, "needs no reminding of anything! I am aware of the risks! I am aware of the problems, and complications and pitfalls!" He raised his wand bringing an end to the Cruciatus Curse before turning his attention to the silvery blond haired Lucius Malfoy, "Lucius?"

"All goes well, my Lord. The finances are more than sufficient for now," he answered, "So long as costs remain within the constraints established at the outset of the project, we shall have no problems financing it for the foreseeable future."

"Excellent," he said, "Proceed as planned. Leave, my Death Eaters." He added the last almost as an afterthought, "Lucius, a moment."

Lucius stood behind his chair and waited as everyone else departed. He took his seat as Voldemort gestured, "I recall that you mentioned that your son Draco had managed to subvert one of the purebloods who follow Albus Dumbledore?"

Voldemort smiled, "Enlighten me, old friend." The head of the house of Malfoy did just that, providing great detail as to who and how Draco had accomplished his most artful manipulation of Ronald Bilius Weasely, "Could we use him as a spy?"

"Unlikely, my lord," he replied, "Draco was shortsighted, and seeking a way to hurt Potter, nothing further," he added hastily, "He achieved his aim, breaking the "Golden Trio" of Gryffindor, but the damage is irreparable at present."

"So noted," said the Dark Lord dryly as he pressed the Dark Mark upon his own arm, summoning Severus Snape who arrived within minutes of the summons.

"You sent for me, my lord?"

The Dark Lord nodded curtly, "As Malfoy is in charge of our propaganda campaign against Dumbledore and Potter," he spat both names with as much venom as he could muster, "I believe it's time to provide you," he nodded to Malfoy, "with a little more ammunition."

Snape nodded briskly, "It took Potter somewhat longer than expected, and he could only do it with the Goblins whispering in his ear, but Potter made his move: The rift between Potter and Dumbledore has widened in to a significant breach, and with a little subtle manipulation, the breach will be irreconcilable."

Snape rapidly brought Malfoy and an eavesdropping silver pawed rat up to speed on these latest developments, "Ms. Skeeter would prove very useful, if pointed in the right direction."

It was this moment that the rat chose to retake his human form and intervene, "Is Snape's course of action the wisest one to pursue master?" that simple question brought all activity to a halt, as Voldemort twirled his wand between his fingers. "Potter manipulated a press black out throughout the previous school year, using the Quibbler to wage his own public relations war against the Prophet, and he marginalized the Prophet quickly."

It was true that now the Quibbler was a respected publication in its own right, and its readership and fan base had remained remarkably

loyal, despite the Prophet's mudslinging, "Your point?" snapped Severus.

"What is to stop him from doing the same again?"

"A valid concern Wormtail," conceded Voldemort, "One neither of you even thought to consider!" It was low hex, but still strong enough to mimic a powerful slap across the face. It was doubly insulting: That neither Snape nor Malfoy were worth the effort of a Cruciatus Curse, one that had Wormtail sniggering inside.

"Indeed," replied the Dark Lord drily, "Draco has done well, with one, but can he do more? When war comes, I must know that Hogwarts will fall! Draco, can rally Slytherin House, but can he rally others?"

"Ron Weasley is the first step. The boy is not overly popular or influential but he can be a stepping stone to reach others. For the moment if we proceed as planned..."

"Yes," interrupted Voldemort, "We proceed as planned," he met the gaze of each Death Eater before him: Snape, Wormtail and Malfoy, "It will not be long, before this country is mine!"

Chapter 30

Trial

Harry eye's snapped open, and he lay perfectly still, almost frozen for a long moment. The moments stretched in to a minute and he finally relaxed. She was still asleep. He looked over at her for a moment, the blonde hair splayed across the pillow, one shapely leg poking out from under the blanket, mumbling something incoherent about five more minutes.

Their last date had been a comedy of errors, but Harry still consoled himself with one fact: She had been laughing the whole time, especially when he had point blank refused to try the whole baby octopus. The restaurant had a simple well-lit minimalist interior. "I think... it... just grabbed my chopstick...."he gasped, partly over dramatizing it as he engaged in a tug of war with the bamboo utensil. Fortunately, they had snagged a booth in a back corner which meant that they were not only out of sight of the other diners, but they were also somewhat obscured from the restaurant's staff, considering they were all Japanese – or at least Asian – would have probably taken offense to Harry's remark about the overly live nature of their cuisine. Japanese food is meant to be fresh but not that fresh.

At least, he knew better than to try the lump green past that had smelt a little too pungent by itself. It had smelt a little too pungent to be any kind of seafood. He had followed her lead, mixing it with the soy sauce and then adding more sauce to water down the accompaniment. "What happened to your being open minded enough to try anything once?" she teased

His retort of, "My mind is open, it's my mouth is clamped shut!" had her practically crying in to her Miso Soup. Fortunately, the rest of the meal had been comprised of sushi and sashimi that he could recognize as being either fish, eel, chicken or vegetable of some kind. The rest of that particular date was a blur in his mind, except for the way they had spent the last part of the night star gazing on the grounds of the manor. The night had stretched on in to the early hours of the morning before they had gone to bed.

He grinned, slightly, neither of them had actually been tired, but it just seemed, polite to call it a night at almost three in the morning.

They had wandered in to each other on the landing and retreated to what was supposed to have been her room for just that one night. They had both thought they would kill the rest of the night talking, only for Fleur to fall asleep within minutes of stretching out. Harry had actually sat up to leave but the bed gave him away with a creak that Blake, at the other end of the mansion had heard. He was already standing when he heard the whisper, "Stay?" he froze, "Please?"

"You know," he had whispered back, "You can't have what you want."

"Not now... maybe not ever," she admitted, "But, at least.... Something..."

That room where they had nearly ruined their... relationship had become her room within his mansion where the couple spent their nights curled up against each other. Fleur never said it, but even if they did share the bed, she invariably woke in the mornings to find his arm draped over her protectively. Dobby and Winky had said nothing on the matter, but they were in private agreement that it was good that Master Harry was moving on, and happier. Blake had been unmerciful in his teasing the next morning when they had come down within a few minutes of each other. However, Blake was enough of a gentleman to refrain from teasing when she was present, "No intention of getting on the wrong side of her," he'd said hastily, "But you are fair game! Especially since Buckbeak won't fight back with words."

He glanced at the clock on the bedside table and cursed quietly. "Five in the morning," he cast a silencing charm over the bed and got up. The nightmares were still there, but at least now, they did not have such a hold over him. They still woke him, regularly but at least he was not setting fire or freezing things in his sleep. The only question remained what to do with the wand fragments buried in his flesh. He shrugged. Maybe that would come in handy somehow some way.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present as he leaned over and kissed the still sleeping half witch, half Veela on the cheek. She had become... someone special to him. "Come so far so fast," he muttered to himself. Fleur was not much of an early riser – she never had been as far as he knew, but as he changed and

headed down to the grounds of the Potter Manor to begin his routine morning workout, he let his mind run over the plan for his trial, scheduled for that morning.

Breakfast was a slightly awkward affair. Everyone knew what was coming and Blake had been quiet, offering only a few nuggets of advice, "Don't lose your temper," he had said very abruptly, "Stick to the facts, be polite, and don't forget that the law is on your side. Even underage wizards are allowed to use magic in a life threatening situation." Then, Blake knew that he was not an underage wizard anymore. If circumstances had been slightly different, the charges would have been a whole lot worse.

Beyond that, they had said nothing more until Fleur and Harry had taken the Floo in to her apartment at Diagon Alley. She hugged him, and held him far longer than necessary. She was confident that he had everything, especially with a team of Goblin lawyers on his side. But as they walked down the alley towards the Bank, Harry could not help but feel a wave of apprehension wash through him. He took a breath, clearing his mind and raising his Occlumency barriers as they entered the bank where they were greeted by Marinashka and her two colleagues. The good bye was brief between the odd couple and the mismatched pair of wizard and goblins left the bank via floo for the ministry of magic.

They arrived, Marinashka first, followed by Harry who stumbled out of the fireplace instead of landing on his face as usual, "Been practicing have we?" she teased. He grinned and nodded, "You'll get it right eventually." She gave him a moment to study their surroundings, standing at one end of a long hall with a polished, dark wooden floor and a dozen gilded fireplaces lining both walls. Gleaming golden symbols decorated the walls that kept moving and changing like some enormous heavenly notice board. It was clear that the working day was starting as witches and wizards emerged from the fire places one after the other from the left-hand fireplaces. On the right side, shorter queues were forming, "night shift waiting to go home," she grunted, taking the lead.

Halfway down the hall was a fountain composed of larger than life-size golden figures: A witch and wizard were flanked by a centaur, goblin and a house-elf that seemed to stare up, at the witch and wizard with adoration. Jets of water flew from the ends of their

outstretched wand, the centaur's arrowhead, the tip of the goblin's hat and from each of the house elves ears. "The hell?" muttered Harry.

As they passed the fountain, Harry saw silver Sickles and bronze Knuts glinting up at him from the bottom of the pool. A small smudged sign beside it read: "All proceeds from the Fountain of Magical Brethren will be given to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries."

Harry stared at the plaque for a moment and shook his head, "Fountain of magical brethren my eye," he thought contemptuously. The statue placed witches and wizards at the top and every other as second classes slightly behind them with the house elves at the bottom, as always. He blinked in surprise as an ally of sorts stepped out of one of the many fireplaces, "Mr. Weasley!" he called, "Over here!" He shook hands warmly with the wizard who had acted like a father to him for the past three years.

"Here for your trial?" he asked quietly, receiving a nod in return, "Signed in with security yet?" Harry critically eyed the badly shaved wizard in peacock blue robes oblivious to the world behind his copy of the Daily Prophet. Marinshka raised an eyebrow critically and Harry nodded his agreement as they made their way over with Mr. Weasley in tow. Harry took two steps forward and cleared his throat. The wizard slapped his paper down and held up a long golden rod, thin and flexible like a car aerial, "Wand," he grunted. Harry flexed his wrist and his wand sprang in to his hand, which he dropped in to a strange brass instrument where it vibrated for a moment, "Vine wood with Dragon Heartstring, 10¾ inches right?"

Harry clamped down on his emotions, "Yeah. That's it."

"I keep this," said the wizard, impaling the slip of parchment on a small brass spike. "You get this back," he added, thrusting the wand at Harry.

"Thanks."

They made their way in to the crowd as a lift descended in front of them. The golden grille slid back and Harry and his lawyer made their way in to the crowd. It was then that people noticed who they were sharing a lift with and that seemed to create a cocoon of space

around them as everyone pressed in to the corners. The grille slammed and began to descend.

"Level Seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club and Ludicrous Patents Office." The lift doors opened. Harry glimpsed an untidy-looking corridor for only an instant before the doors slammed shut and the lift continued its shuddering downward passage.

"Level Six, Department of Magical Transportation, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office and Apparation Test Centre." Once again, the doors slammed open and a number of people got on and off, along with a number of pale violet colored airplanes bearing the seal of the Ministry upon their wings.

"Just inter-departmental memos," Mr Weasley muttered to him. "We used to use owls, but the mess was unbelievable ... droppings all over the desks ..." They clattered downwards another floor.

"Level Five, Department of International Magical Co-operation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats." Two of the memos zipped from the lift as again a number of passengers alighted.

"Level Four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau."

"Level Three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, Obliviator Headquarters and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee." The lift was suddenly empty and silent without the pointing fingers, stress and faint mutterings, except for Mr. Weasley, Marinahka and Harry

"Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"This is us, Harry," said Marinashka. To Harry's surprise Mr Weasley followed them out explaining that his office was on the other side of

the floor. They had just bid goodbye to Mr. Weasley when one of those small paper airplanes can to halt a few inches from Harry's nose. He snatched from the air and unfolded it, "Marinashka!" he thrust the paper in to her hands.

"Changed the time... and venue... 08:00 in Courtroom ten!" her eyes narrowed, as she glanced at her watch, "We should have been there five minutes ago!" she growled, "Typical ministry underhandedness!" she slammed the "down" button on the elevator repeatedly and to her aggravation it was full. She glanced at her watch again and growled intent on letting the elevator go when Harry put his foot in the door.

"I am Harry Potter," he growled, "Mentally unstable one, according to the Daily Prophet, yet emancipated, with full wand rights! I am getting on this lift. Now does anyone..." There was a stampede as the elevator emptied. They began their descent.

"Department of Mysteries," announced the cool female voice as the lift doors rattled opened and they took off, in a Goblin war run. The walls down here were bare, without magical windows and no doors, apart from a heavy plain black door set at the far end of the corridor. Marinashka took a sharp turn to the left and down a flight of stairs that Harry duplicated with ease, "Down here!" she said, "The lift doesn't even come down this far ... why they are conducting a trial for misuse of magic... down here..."

They skidded to a halt and took a moment to compose themselves. Harry cast a number of discreet refreshing charms as he studied this corridor. It reminded him a great deal of the dungeons at Hogwarts, specifically the one that lead to potions with the greasy git. The doors they passed here were heavy wooden ones with iron bolts and keyholes.

"Ready?" she asked.

His heart rate slowed as he took a calming breath and raised his occulmency shields to the full power. "Let's get this over with." He said calmly, grasping the heavy iron door handle and stepped in to the courtroom.

Occulmency being what it is, Harry had mastered his emotions but he recognized this dungeon, or at least thought he did: He had seen

this place in the memories stolen from Dumbledore's pensieve. "That's nice," he thought sardonically, "and I'm sure meant to be subtle something or other to somebody somewhere." He took a few steps forward and halted as he scanned the rows of faces.

The dark stone walls were dimly lit by torches and many of the shadowy figures had been talking in low voices. They fell silent as the door slammed shut behind him, moments before a cold male voice rang across the courtroom, "You, are late."

His gaze dropped to the chair in the center of the room, the arms of which were covered in chains. He glanced up at the speaker shrouded in shadow and then at Marinashka, and sent a gentle probe with his legilimency. He got one back in return, with a slight nod, "Yes I am," he said politely, "Considering that your message reached me at eight precisely, to inform me that my trial had been moved forward, to start at eight precisely, it is no wonder that I am late," he said to the speaker in shadow. "As to taking a seat in a chair that has played host to Death Eaters of Lord Voldemort," he shook his head as the crowd shuddered, "I'd rather stand." Now he had their attention: There were fifty of them, at least, all in plum colored robes with an elaborately worked silver "W" on the left hand side of the chest, staring at him, with curiosity, fear, a few with anger and hatred, others with wonder and adoration.

He recognized the man in the middle of the front row: Cornelius Fudge, Minister. He recognized the witch to the Minister's left: Amelia Bones who gave him the slightest nod. The witch on his right, was in pink but she was sitting as far back as possible, leaving her face in shadow. "Now that the accused is present, let us begin. Are you ready?"

"Yes Minister!" said an eager voice and Harry blinked just to confirm what he was seeing: Percy Weasley, brother of Ronald, eyes fixed on his parchment behind horn-rimmed glasses, quill poised and began to scrawl as the minister began.

"Disciplinary hearing of the twelfth of August," said Fudge in a ringing voice, "into offences committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey." The pair flanking the chair exchanged a glance that went unnoticed, ""Interrogators: Cornelius

Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley."

Harry cut him off smoothly, "Defense Attorney Marinashka Thaz-Dom, of Gringotts as my legal advisor."

"Witness for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," said a quiet voice from behind Harry, who turned his head so fast he cricked his neck.

Dumbledore was striding serenely across the room wearing long, midnight-blue robes and a perfectly calm expression. His long silver beard and hair gleamed in the torchlight as he drew level with Harry and looked up at Fudge through the half-moon spectacles that rested halfway down his very crooked nose. "You're about the last person I ever expected to see!" said Harry quietly as the headmaster came to a stop standing next to Harry.

The members of the Wizengamot were muttering. All eyes were now on Dumbledore. Some looked annoyed, others slightly frightened; two elderly witches in the back row, however, raised their hands and waved in welcome. "Ah," said Fudge, who looked thoroughly disconcerted. "Dumbledore. Yes. You er er got our er er message that the time and er place of the hearing had been changed, then?"

"I must have missed it," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "However, due to a lucky mistake I arrived at the Ministry three hours early, so no harm done."

"Yes," said Fudge again, shuffling his notes. "Well, then. So. The charges. Yes." He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile before him and read aloud, "The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did knowingly, deliberately and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on the second of August at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offence under Paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also

under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks Statute of Secrecy."

Harry had paid no attention to the man's droning as he turned to Dumbledore, casting a discreet privacy charm over them both, "I don't know what you are doing here. But you should not be here. Just stay out of it, please." He added the last, because frankly he had no interest in threatening Dumbledore here, even though he knew he would bury the old man if he had to without hesitation, "You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge said, glaring at Harry over the top of his parchment.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?"

"Yes, but □"

"And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?" said Fudge.

"Yes," said Harry, "but □"

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes, but □"

"Knowing that you were in an area full of Muggles?"

"Yes, but □"

"Fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?"

"Yes," said Harry as he ploughed on, "Dementors don't like Patronus do they?" He had expected muttering or something not silence that was thick enough to cut with knife.

"Dementors?" said Madam Bones after a moment, her thick eyebrows rising "What do you mean?"

"I mean there were two Dementors down that alleyway and they went for me and my cousin!"

"Ah," said Fudge again, smirking unpleasantly as he looked around at the Wizengamot, as though inviting them to share the joke. "Yes. Yes, I thought we'd be hearing something like this."

"Dementors in Little Whinging?" Madam Bones said, in a tone of great surprise. "I don't understand □"

"Don't you, Amelia?" said Fudge, still smirking. "Let me explain. He's been thinking it through and decided Dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles can't see Dementors, can they, boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient... so it's just your word and no witnesses..."

"Got a Pensieve?" challenged Harry, "Got a couple a drops of Veritaserum lying around?" Dumbledore eyed Harry worriedly, "Legal council has advised me that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, I can request a pensieve to present evidence! I can also demand trial by Veritaserum! Isn't that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?" he asked

"True," said Madam Bones. "Perfectly true."

"Oh, very well, very well," snapped Fudge. "Bring him a pensieve." Fudge grins, "But you should know, Mr. Potter, that false memories are very easily detected." Harry gave the Minister a look that would have frozen Vodka as the artifact was placed on a conjured table. In preparation for this, Harry had pulled the events of that evening to the forefront of his mind and it took moments to extract the memory, dropping it in to the bowl. The normally calm, placid silver surface began to bubble, ever so slightly, turning black and red in color.

The charmed pensieve began to playback the events of that one night that haunted Harry's sleep that he could only sleep through because of his occulmency: The night of Lord Voldemort's rebirth. Chaos erupted within an instant, but as the memory played itself out, the Wizengamot fell silent, as they watched it. Unable to tear their eyes away from the playback. He had their undivided attention now, and there was a pin drop silence as it drew to an end, just Voldemort was reborn and summoned his Death Eaters to his side, "Whoops," said Harry, with a carefree attitude he did not feel, "Wrong memory."

Those two words resulted in utter pandemonium while Harry conjured a pair of chairs, and offered his lawyer a seat, before taking one himself, "You know, its shame that I forgot the...."

She produced a small bag of popcorn, "Best I could do, on such short notice," she said drily. He chuckled as they watched the Wizengamot of the United Kingdom run around in circles, flapping their arms in the air, much like a flock of frightened headless chickens. The level of panic meant that the snacking duo were momentarily forgotten until Dumbledore raised his wand, letting it emit a single loud bang that shocked everyone in to silence,

"If it pleases the Wizengamot, the contents of memory, as we all know can be falsified, but to create such a detailed memory, with such exacting detail, to include names and faces as this has done, is clearly beyond the capabilities of any teenager wizard, no matter how powerful. Even I would have difficulty in maintaining a false memory such as this. However, it is not relevant to the matter at hand," Harry watched the master manipulator at work, and wondered just how he did it. He had all of them listening, and a number eating out of his hand too. Nevertheless, he could see a number did not agree but that was irrelevant for the moment. "Perhaps Harry, you could provide us with the relevant memory?"

He nodded and approached the pensieve, in half a mind to ruin Dumbledore where he stood, but banished that thought to the back of his mind, "Of course, Headmaster." Once again, he had their attention but in this instance, they found themselves hard pressed to find fault with his actions as the memory ended, Dumbledore realized that Harry had not gone farther than necessary. Tonks, Moody nor he had appeared. Harry was playing a cautious game, he realized. Nothing he did was reckless and unplanned. Even ruffling the entire Wizengamot was deliberate. However, what purpose that could be still eluded him.

"Convincing enough?" asked Harry casually.

Fudge was left spluttering as Madame Bones broke in, "It is clear that there were Dementors in little Whinging.

"But Dementors wandering into a Muggle suburb and just happening to come across a wizard?" snorted Fudge, "The odds on that must be very, very long. Even Bagman wouldn't have bet □"

"Oh, I don't think any of us believe the Dementors were there by coincidence," said Dumbledore lightly. Even Harry turned to face the headmaster, without giving away his surprise: Dumbledore had stumbled upon the next phase of the trial plan, probably without meaning to.

The witch sitting to the right of Fudge, with her face in shadow, moved slightly but everyone else was frozen, processing the implications of what Dumbledore was suggesting, "And what is that supposed to mean?" Fudge asked icily. Harry wondered how so dense a man ever was elected to the position of minister.

"It means that I think they were ordered there," said Harry, cutting in smoothly, raising an eyebrow in warning towards the headmaster.

"I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of Dementors to go strolling through Little Whinging!" barked Fudge.

"Not if the Dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry of Magic these days," growled Harry.

"I have already given you my views on this matter, Cornelius," echoed Dumbledore.

"Yes, you have," said Fudge forcefully, "and I have no reason to believe that your views are anything other than bilge, Dumbledore. The Dementors remain in place in Azkaban and are doing everything we ask them to."

"Then," said Dumbledore, quietly but clearly, "we must ask ourselves why somebody within the Ministry ordered a pair of Dementors into Little Whinging, and that alleyway on the second of August." In the complete silence that greeted these words, the witch to the right of Fudge leaned forwards so that Harry saw her for the first time.

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue. Harry recognized the ugly toad of a woman

almost at once, "The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister," said Fudge.

The witch spoke in a fluttery, girlish, high-pitched voice that reminded Harry of twittering bird... a really ugly twittering bird, "I'm sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore," she said, with a simper that left her big, round eyes as cold as ever. "But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this... boy!"

She gave a silvery laugh that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand as he clenched his hands, reigning in his emotions as a few other members of the Wizengamot laughed and sniggered with her. Though it was clear those who were laughing were not amused, Harry took note of them, just in case and was not surprised: Suspected Death Eaters from the first war were amongst those laughing. He could not help but wonder if Jane Umbridge sported a dark mark.

"If it is true that the Dementors are taking orders only from the Ministry of Magic, and it is also true that two Dementors attacked Harry and his cousin a week ago, then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks," said Dumbledore politely. "Of course, these particular Dementors may have been outside Ministry control □"

"There are no Dementors outside Ministry control!" snapped Fudge, who had turned brick red.

Dumbledore inclined his head in a little bow, and Harry stepped in, "Then I demand, as I am entitled to under Wizengamot Charter, a full investigation! What were two Dementors doing in Little Whinging? Why were they there at all? Why did they attack without authorization? Explain that to me! I want answers!"

"It is not for you to decide what the Ministry of Magic does or does not do!" snapped Fudge, now a shade of magenta of which Uncle Vernon would have been proud, "Especially at the demands of an underaged boy!"

"Funny you should mention that," said Harry, glancing at Marinshka and then at Director Sheppard, who occupied a seat in the third row of the Wizengamot, "I am an adult," he took the folio from

Marinashka and held it out to the Minister, "Approved by the Department of Family Services, with Director Sheppard's approval a week ago."

He glanced at Madam Bones, who readjusted her monocle and stared back at him, frowning slightly. "I would remind everybody that the behavior of these Dementors, if indeed they are not figments of this boy's imagination, is not the subject of this hearing!" said Fudge. "We are here to examine Harry Potter's offences under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!" Fudge was clearly hoping that he had sidestepped that particular minefield.

"Of course we are," said Dumbledore, "but the presence of Dementors in that alleyway is highly relevant. Clause Seven of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and as those exceptional circumstances include situations which threaten the life of the wizard or witch him- or herself, or any witches, wizards or Muggles present at the time of the "

"We are familiar with Clause Seven, thank you very much!" snarled Fudge.

"Of course you are," said Dumbledore courteously. "Then we are in agreement that Harry's use of the Patronus Charm in these circumstances falls precisely into the category of exceptional circumstances the clause describes?"

"I that not " blustered Fudge, fiddling with the papers before him. "It's I want this over with today, Dumbledore!"

"Naturally, " agreed Dumbledore, "But surely, the truth absolves Harry Potter, as he acted in accordance with Clause Seven, and any alternative would be a serious miscarriage of justice..."

"Serious miscarriage, my hat!" said Fudge at the top of his voice. "Have you ever bothered to total up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with, Dumbledore, while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic out of school? I suppose you've forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago "

That wasn't me, it was a house-elf!" said Harry.

"You see?" roared Fudge, gesturing flamboyantly in Harry's direction. "A house-elf! In a Muggle house! I ask you."

"Dobby!" snapped Harry. The house elf appeared with the quiet pop of apparition, and everyone present except Harry seemed to take exception to his appearance, and no wonder. The elf was no longer a half-hunched subservient creature, but one that stood tall. The boots upon his feet were leather and black, like the pants with red piping. There was a plain black undershirt or vest, over which the elf wore a pocketed vest.

"Harry Potter called for Dobby, sir!" his voice was calm, normal, without excitement or fear. Still high-pitched but not squeaky. The care and attention he had received from Harry, and to an extent Blake, meant that he had come in to his own as a more confident creature that no longer skulked and depended on the kindness of others.

"I have asked you to come here about the hover charm three years ago,"

"It was I who cast the hover charm sir!" Dobby admitted freely, "I was trying to..."

"I am not I haven't got time to listen to house-elves! Anyway, that's not the only I he blew up his aunt, for God's sake!" Fudge shouted, banging his fist on the judge's bench and upsetting a bottle of ink.

"And you very kindly did not press charges on that occasion, accepting, I presume, that even the best wizards cannot always control their emotions," said Dumbledore calmly, as Fudge attempted to scrub the ink off his notes.

"And I haven't even started on what he gets up to at school."

"But, as the Ministry has no authority to punish Hogwarts students for misdemeanors at school, Harry's behavior there is not relevant to this hearing," said Dumbledore, as politely as ever, but now with a suggestion of coolness behind his words.

"Oho!" said Fudge. "Not our business what he does at school, eh? You think so?"

"The Ministry does not have the power to expel Hogwarts students, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. "Nor does it have the right to confiscate wands until charges have been successfully proven..."

"Overlooking the laws in a zealous pursuit of justice," cut in the Goblin, "If my client wishes to press charges for harassment, improper protocol, and of being forced to attend a trial, presided over by a biased representative of the Ministry of Magic...."

"Laws can be changed," said Fudge savagely.

"Of course they can," said Dumbledore, inclining his head. "And you certainly seem to be making many changes, Cornelius. Why, in the few short weeks since I was asked to leave the Wizengamot, it has already become the practice to hold a full criminal trial to deal with a simple matter of underage magic!"

A few of the wizards above them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Fudge turned a slightly deeper shade of puce. The toad like witch on his right, however, merely gazed at Dumbledore, her face expressionless. "As far as I am aware," Dumbledore continued, "there is no law yet in place that says this court's job is to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever performed!"

Harry was convinced the headmaster was about to head off on a tangent and a rant so he cut in, "Look, you two can fight later! Right now, you know why I cast the Patronus Charm. You have seen my memory of the events of that night! Do you want me to testify under Veritaserum?" he challenged. He said nothing about the other memory he had accidentally shared, "And there's no telling what else I might... let slip..." he said coolly.

That silenced the Wizengamot, as they wondered collectively what exactly he knew, and Dumbledore, he was gratified, looking extremely worried for an instant. It was good to know that he had the old man on a short leash. Harry turned his attention back to the Wizengamot, deep in urgent whispered conversations. But it was not long in coming, "The Wizengamot finds the defendant not guilty on all charges." No doubt it was costing the Minister a lot to utter those words with a semi-straight face through clenched teeth, "Case dismissed, and all charges will be stricken from the defendant's record."

Harry's abrupt departure took Dumbledore by complete surprise, leaving him standing and staring as the Wizengamot rose, talking, gathering papers and generally packing away. Nobody noticed that the toad like Umbridge was glaring daggers, alternating between Dumbledore and Harry's retreating back.

"Cleared," Marinashka said, pulling the door closed behind him, "of all charges!" she broke in a toothy smile, "I think things went well."

"Only because I had the advice of a good friend to guide me," Harry said, "Otherwise I might have hexed a few of those inbred bastards, especially the ones bearing the Dark Mark."

She chuckled, "well they could not have found you guilty, not on the evidence you presented, but I was worried that they might ignore that and..." she broke off. They had just reached the ninth-level corridor and the Minister was standing a few feet away from a blond haired, pointed pale faced individual. Their conversation broke off as cold grey eyes narrowed and fixed upon Harry's face. "Lazy bugger must have apparated," thought Harry.

"Well, well, well," said Lucius Malfoy coolly, "...Patronus Potter." Harry growled, his hand balling in to fists. He had last seen those cold grey eyes through slits in a Death Eater mask, the jeering voice in a dark graveyard, it broke back other memories that he ruthlessly quashed. He would not show fear, weakness, no emotion, not to this... vermin standing before him. Harry could not believe that Lucius Malfoy dared look him in the face, here within the Ministry, or that the Minister of Magic was talking to the Death Eater, "The Minister was just telling me about your escape, Potter," drawled Mr. Malfoy. "Quite astonishing, the way you continue to wriggle out of very tight holes... snakelike, in fact."

Marinashka gripped Harry's wand arm in warning, "I do a good job of escaping," said Harry calmly, as he stared right back, "Unlike you," he added casually, "Dobby. Winky." Both house elves appeared with a "pop!" and almost immediately had spells ready to fly from the fingertips, "I'm sure you remember at least one of my house elves," he said casually, "Dobby kicked your ass once, I'm sure he'd love to do it again."

"Yes please, sir!" said Dobby with a smile that bordered on the absolutely feral, "Dobby would like that, very much!"

He took great delight in the way Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he swore the man had hissed something at him, "Who's the snake now Malfoy?" asked Harry, "Go ahead. I'll give you the first shot free. Then I'll let my house elves finish you off. And what in Merlin's name is a Death Eater doing in the Ministry?"

"I do not think private matters between the Minister and myself are any concern of yours, Potter," said Malfoy, smoothing the front of his robes. Harry distinctly heard the gentle clinking of a pocket full of gold. "Really, just because you are Dumbledore's golden boy, you must not expect the same indulgence from the rest of us... shall we go up to your office, then, Minister?"

"Certainly" said Fudge, turning his back to them both, "This way, Lucius." They strode off together, talking in low voices. Marinashka did not let go of Harry's shoulder until they had disappeared into the lift. He turned to his house elves, "Take a message to Blake and Fleur," he said, "Not guilty on all charges." With a brisk nod, the elves vanish with a pop.

"Why was the Death Eater not waiting outside Fudge's office?" Harry growled, "What was he doing down here?"

"Trying to sneak down to the courtroom, if you ask me," she said thoughtfully, "Come, we should leave before we meet any more unwelcome individuals."

"I'm guessing," Harry said, "That Malfoy senior's business is gold related."

"You would not be far from the mark," agreed Marinashka, "The Malfoy family has been giving generously to all manner of charities and causes, building influence with the right people so that he can ask for favors, and exert pressure where it suits his agenda. Gold, buys him loyalty."

"But such loyalty," countered Harry, "can be rented if your pockets are deep enough." Harry blinked, "You don't suppose that Fudge is under an Imperius Curse... I mean there might not be much of a mind there to control, but..."

"The goblins do not think that is so," said Marinashka carefully, "but anything is possible where Voldemort and his Death Eaters are concerned." The doors slid open and they stepped out into the now almost□deserted Atrium. The security guard was hidden behind the Daily Prophet and did not even notice them as they passed the fountain. Harry paused and reached in to his pocket for his money bag. Considering that the gold went to St. Mungos, he had no complaints.

However, the statue was a mirror for the state of the wizarding world in that people were naïve enough to believe this illusion: The wizard and witch wore vapid, foolish smiles, like brain dead beauty pageant contestants and he knew that neither the Centaurs nor Goblins worshipped wizards. Only the house elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing, but Harry had already demonstrated how they could be incredibly powerful, if given the right motivation. Dobby had not only trust, but also loyalty, respect as part of something bigger. In essence: he had a purpose.

Harry turned his moneybag upside□down and emptied the contents in to the pool. St. Mungo's was going to need the money, and more before long.

Chapter 31

Summer's End

Dobby was nervous, and understandably, so as he walked along one of the many halls that lined the interior of Gringotts. It wasn't that he was nervous about the Goblins, or of being in Gringotts, it was that he carried a message of some importance to Miss Delacour, in a part of the bank he had never been to before, surrounded by armed Goblins who had every right to kill if they deemed it necessary. When he arrived at Fleur's office, he knocked and waited a moment before entering.

Fleur's office was small, cramped and she shared it with a wizard and two Goblins. Fortunately, only Fleur was present as Dobby bowed slightly, "Letter from Mr.... Harry, Miss Delacour."

Fleur raised a finger condescendingly, "Dobby," she sighed dramatically, "How many times have I asked you not to call me Ms. Delacour, but just Fleur?"

Dobby smiled ever so slightly, "As always, you will have to ask me at least once more, Ms. Delacour."

"Well then, why do you call Harry, Harry?" she challenged.

He shrugged, "He is my master, and he told me to." Fleur took the envelope from Dobby's outstretched hand and opened it. It contained only two words that brought a smile to her face and Dobby felt the wave of energy coming off her. It was good, pleasure, no... happiness, "Ms. Delacour, if I may ask," he hesitated as she frowned which gave way to a shrug as she nodded, "Not guilty?" her smile broadened, "That is good news," he said, "Will there be anything else?"

She shook her head and he retreated, bowing once as he did so. Leaving the office behind him, he made his way through the bank and then vanished with a pop. It was late in the morning and he still had more than a dozen notices to deliver. Winky would need his help, considering the preparations required at the Manor.

It was only when Fleur returned... home, for lack of a better word, did she realize that something was going on, "Throwing dinner parties without me Harry?" she teased.

"Yeah," he said airily, "I just invited a few of the Malfoys, and Fudges, thought I'd have a few Centaurs along to give horse rides..." he deadpanned with a smile, "Just a small thing, you know? Have not had all of my friends in the same place for a long time, and figured it would be nice."

She smiled before heading upstairs, "Any advice on what I should wear?"

"Yeah," he replied, "Don't ask me. I'm hopeless!" she laughed as he came up the stairs, "But I think... its time," he said seriously, "The others should know."

"You are ready to tell them?" he shrugged, "Ah... they already know and you just want to get it out there?" again he shrugged, "Then what is it?"

"They are my friends, and I care about them, I care about what they think on many things, but my personal... our personal lives, is nobody's business but our own." He grinned at her, "And I'm sure that there is a betting pool going on the when and the how." She smiled and privately agreed, it sounded like a typically Weasely thing to do. True enough, Harry conceded the point, but there is more than one thing that could qualify as typically Weasely.

The party was set to start at seven that night, and it was not long before the guests started to arrive. His friends were the first to arrive: Three Weasely's, their parents and Charlie and Bill as well as it would have been a little unfair not to include Bill who worked at Gringotts and Charlie who was back on leave from Romania. Although Percy and Ron were invited, neither had bothered to respond to the invitation for their own reasons. Percy, Harry had learned was a sycophantic ministry boot licker, and Ron was... Ron. Luna and her father were next with Colin in tow, followed by Neville and his grandmother.

Harry had gone with Blake's advice, and opted for cocktails, drinks and snacks before a sit down dinner where the seating arrangement deliberately mixed the teenagers with the adults. The presence of

Amelia Bones raised a number of eyebrows, and the atmosphere cooled slightly, but it was not long before conversation was snaking its way amongst the adults. Griphook and Marinashka were present as well, along with several of Hogwarts professors. Twenty odd people in attendance, with two abstentions. Not too shabby thought Harry. He had honestly not expected Percy to attend or Ron but had invited both partly to keep the peace and partly as an olive branch.

Talk ranged across a variety of topics as Harry made the rounds, spending as much time as he could with all of his guests. Of course, word was out that Harry and Fleur were a couple and he had to deal with an extensive amount of leg pulling especially from the twins, "Don't make unleash my Veela," he said playfully, "What?" he groaned, "She's standing behind me isn't she?"

"Unleash your Veela Mr. Potter?" she said quietly, that French accent slipping through, "Remind me to have Dobby and Winky add some ice cubes to the sofa, where you will be spending the night."

"She's already got him whipped!" whispered Fred gleefully only to realize that Fleur had heard every word, and was giving him a thoughtful stare, that for some reason turned his blood cold.

"I can have more than my boyfriend whipped," she replied, "I'll just have the house elves set up the whipping post in the backyard and, if I recall, you are ticklish...an eagle feather would be more useful..." Laughter filled the room and Harry was certain that even the Matriarch of the Longbottom clan had cracked the barest hint of a smile.

Cocktails gave way to dinner, where everyone found themselves seated next to someone they were not overly familiar with. As he had hoped, the almost randomly assigned seating forced everyone to make a new acquaintances and hopefully new friends as he listened in on snippets of conversation.

"... still underfunded, and there has been no progress on the Dementor investigation," said Amelia...

"...I know, little about the new defense against the dark arts professor," said Professor McGonagall.

"...Do you reckon it is... you know... jinxed?" asked Fred as he thanked Winky for refilling his butterbeer.

"How do you mean?" asked Griphook as he took another sip from his fire whiskey.

"Well... in four years, one has died..." said Fred

"The second is in St. Mungos..." continued George.

"The third, and only competent one was forced to resign when it was leaked he was a werewolf," put in Ginny.

"The fourth was a Death Eater in disguise," added Neville, "I see your point, about the position being jinxed."

"Shame Hagrid couldn't make it," said Luna, "I did want to ask him a few questions."

"He is in France, as far as I am aware," replied Augusta Longbottom, who seemed to have taken a bit of a shine to the somewhat eccentric young witch who was, to Harry's amusement, still wearing her radish earrings, "Visiting the Headmistress of Beauxbatons. Madame Maxime and Hagrid have become, rather close."

"Don't worry about Percy," said Arthur, "He'll come around eventually...." Molly was unsurprisingly silent on the subject as Remus comforted her across the table. Blake was lost in a discussion with Flitwick about some charm or another. Harry felt a sudden pang of sadness: Everyone seated at this table had lost someone or several someones to Voldemort.

Harry had done his homework, all heroes, all forgotten, as if they no longer mattered: Marlene McKinnon: killed along with her entire family. Frank and Alice Longbottom, tortured in to insanity. Emmeline Vance had used the Hellfire Tempest Curse and deliberately lost control of the curse to kill herself, the pack of Death eaters and burned her home to the ground rather than be captured. Benjy Fenwick...only a charred wand was found in his home. Edger Bones and his wife vanished without a trace and never found. The Prewett Brothers Gideon and Fabian had killed five Death Eaters before Voldemort killed them both. Dorcas Meadowes, tortured and

executed by Voldemort. His parents, Cedric... Hermione....those were the few that he could remember from the catalogue of the dead.

Harry blinked. Fortunately, he had not missed much, just a few minutes of dinner and his house elves clearing away the plates from the main course. Dobby's cooking was fantastic, and if the Elf had accepted, Harry would have given him a raise: The steaks were cooked to perfection, as were the potatoes and with everything about the meal having gone perfectly thus far. He would yet to see any glass fall below the half-empty mark before being refilled.

It was almost eleven in the evening when everyone was done with not only the cheese but also desert and were making ready to leave. As arranged, Blake along with Dobby and Winky diverted the teenagers, leaving Harry alone with a roomful of adults, "Good Evening, and thank you all for coming. I apologize for giving very short notice of this event, but I felt it was necessary precaution," he paused and looked around the room, at the faces of the men and women before him, "Albus Dumbledore, and I have had a parting of ways. Some of you have already paid to high a price in the first war and a second war is coming. I am asking for all of you to consider carefully where you will stand before the hammer falls." He turned to the Weaselys and Remus first, "I hope, that all of you will stand with me and your sons and daughters, as brothers and sisters." He turned to the Professors from Hogwarts, "I hope I can count upon the educators, to stand for what is right," he hesitated, knowing that Madame Bones was perhaps the wild card in the room, "And should it be deemed necessary, bringing down those in authority who refuse to acknowledge the truth."

"Choose your next words carefully, Mr. Potter," warned Amelia Bones, "I am still sworn to uphold wizarding law."

"All I say," he replied, repeating what Marinashka had told him "is the opinion of one member of Britain's magical community. I am entitled to the opinion that the government has and continues to fail and that it needs to change. Consider where you stand, because the storm that approaches can plunge our world in to darkness, and our enemies, will be legion." Harry nodded towards the door, "Your children already know where they stand. They know what they face; they know what they fight. Will you stand with them?" He gestured to the pensive, "Madam Bones, you already know what it shows. All of you should see it, before you decide."

Not long after, the floo network received a work out as a number of shocked and shaken adults departed, leaving the teens to a party of their own. Given that Blake and Remus were present, along with two house elves, the parents felt comfortable enough leaving their children to spend the night... if only they knew.

"Been practicing?" he asked quietly as they gathered in the training room. They nodded, all of them had been reviewed charms, transfiguration and what they knew of defense and whatever they have learned, "Then let's see where we stand." They were in good shape, able to defend and fight but what worried Harry was how they would do in a real fight, where it was death or victory, where killing was the only option.

He prayed that they would never find out. Harry had never consciously thought about that night in the graveyard of how he had killed using the Void Shadow Curse. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel about that... he should, feel something... not be complete indifferent to it. It was a sudden realization that there was a massive hole in what he was planning: They could defend themselves, and do so well, but their minds were still open to attack. "Winky!" the elf appeared a moment later and bowed slightly, "Contact Marinashka, and see if she is willing to meet me tomorrow." With a pop, the elf vanished.

He looked at his gathered and somewhat battered friends, "I've overlooked something," he said, "Something important," they stared at him, "Any of you know how to defend your minds from intrusion? From Legilimency?" the blanks looks he received were not encouraging as he set about explaining the mind arts as best he could. While his own training was complete, he was far from being a true master of either, "I will arrange lessons with my instructor, for all of you, but I can promise you this. You are going to have a massive headache before it's over."

True to his word, the following weeks were a crash course in Occulemency, and Harry not only paid for the lessons, but also arranged for additional training, for those who wanted. Everything for dueling, hand-to-hand combat, tactics, Herbology for Neville, even Ancient Runes and Arithmancy for Luna. Three weeks of daily mind, body, spell and physical training with the Goblins set him back almost twenty five thousand Galleons. "If you want the best, you

need to be prepared to pay for the best," Marinashka had explained with a chuckle. He could not fault the simple logic of that, as August became a boot camp for Harry's new recruits.... To whatever it was he was building and had yet to name.

The real program was closer to three months in length, but this was a good start and they were all the better for it, when they met up on Platform 9¾. Harry was the last to arrive, having been rather unwilling to leave Fleur, who had been just as unwilling to let him go. The result was Harry getting more than his fair share of teasing about how he was directly under this girlfriend's thumb, especially from Blake and Remus who had come to see Harry off. "No Fleur, Harry?"

"Nope," he said, "If she'd shown up, I might not have gotten on the Express." They clambered aboard, and Harry noted that none of his friends had to lug a heavy trunk around as they piled in to the last compartment of the train. Harry set to work, enlarging the space and setting up a battery of charms and basic wards before yanking open the window to wave good-bye to the gaggle of platform bound parents.

"Guess what Gran got me for my birthday," said Neville as he leaned back on his seat.

"Another Remembrall?" said Harry, remembering the marble-like device Neville's grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his abysmal memory back in their first year.

He chuckled "Nope, don't need one anymore... even though I did lose that one ages ago," he rummaged in his bag for a moment, and pulled out a small cactus like plant, except that in place of spines where round nodules, that looked a lot like boils. "Mimulus mibletonia," he said proudly. The plant pulsed, more than a little and it made Harry nervous, especially since it suddenly looked like a diseased infected organ. "They are really rare. The greenhouses at Hogwarts don't have one." Harry whistled in surprise. Considering that the greenhouses stocked just about everything.

"What does it... do?" asked Fred.

"Eat people?" added George.

Neville adopted a slightly hurt expression, "Loads of stuff, but it doesn't eat people. If it did, I would have fed it Snape a long time ago." He grinned, "Snape as plant food, nourishing his oh so precious potions ingredients." He grabbed a quill from his bag, "It's got a great defense mechanism to. Watch this!" he held the stunted looking plant up to his eye and gave it a sharp prod with the tip of its quill.

For something so tiny, it produced an incredible wave of thick, stinking dark green jets of viscous fluid that painted the windows and ceiling and everyone caught it its volatile path smelling like rancid manure, "S-sorry!" gasped Neville, "Feth! I didn't think it would do! It's not poisonous or anything!" Harry spat out a mouthful of the vile fluid, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as the door to their compartment slid open.

"Uh... hi," said a very nervous voice, "... bad time?" Harry wiped the slime out of his eyes and glanced at the door. He made a note about those exclusion wards: either he had set them wrong, or they would only keep the targeted foursome out of their carriage. He stared for a moment at the raven-haired former seeker of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, "Cho," Harry said levelly, "Fraid things are a bit of a mess right now, perhaps you could come back later?" It was a straight, unequivocal shut out if there ever was one and she retreated without another word.

The train ride was peaceful and without incident, except for one when Harry twitched rather suddenly, upsetting a napping Hedwig who collapsed his shoulder of atop Crookshanks. There were ruffled feathers and unsheathed claws but the pair subsided after an apologetic hoot from Hedwig. "Seems his animal magnetism is still intact," remarked Fred.

"Something tripped your wards?" asked Luna quietly. Harry eyed her for a moment, "I felt and saw the magic as you were casting earlier," and his raised eyebrow did not escape her attention either, "It's a rare ability," she explained, "Doesn't have a name but Dad thinks I got it from my mother, because he says it didn't come from him. It lets me see the flow of magic, for spells and other such things." She smiled at him, "It's also the reason that I seem a little..."

"Unusual?" supplied Harry. That made sense considering the way Luna was Luna. Seeing magic all the time would skew one's perspective of just about everything, slightly.

The smile broadened and she shrugged, "You could say that." The conversation had attracted everyone's attention, "So what wards did you use?"

"More a charm scheme than wards actually," Harry gestured to the twins, "Something those two helped me put together. For the moment, it was just an alert that someone passed outside. But given the rattling, it was just the witch with the tea trolley." Harry shrugged.

It was not long before the train began to slow and the usual racket erupted as everyone struggled out in to the corridor with their various pieces of luggage. Fortunately, there was no need for Harry and his associates to rush, what with their shrunken trucks, they only had to grab their various pets - one cat, one owl, one toad - and were amongst the last to disembark. Their first breath of the cold night air was a pine scented slap in the face that lined the path down to the lake.

A brisk female voice called out, "Any more first years? First years, to me please!" The lantern normally borne by Hagrid instead illuminated the prominent chin and severe haircut of Professor Grubbly-Plank. His dinner party had prepared all of them for Hagrid's temporary disappearance, courtesy of Professor McGonagall and Flitwick.

They arrived at the usual place, awaiting the horseless carriages and stared. The carriages were no longer horseless. There were creatures that did not hesitate to stare right back at Harry. They stared at each other for a few long moments as if they were assessing each other. They were fleshless, black coats clinging to them, outlining every bone in their bodies. Their heads were dragonish and their pupil-less eyes were snow white and stared. They had massive black leather like wings folded along their backs

Harry's gaze caught sight of Draco Malfoy, pushing his way through a gaggle of timid looking second years, just so they could get ahead in the rush for one of the coaches. The gaze of the two rivals met and Malfoy changed course. Harry barely suppressed a smirk, "Contact forward." His honor guard fanned out behind him, giving

them all enough room to act. Harry was not in the least bit surprised at one of that group, "Ron's with them," he said in warning.

"He's picked his side," growled Colin, "I've picked mine."

"So Potter," it was the same old "upper crust" mocking Malfoy drawl, "You brought your gang of scar head worshippers back to Hogwarts, did you?"

"My friends," corrected Harry casually, "came back to complete their education. But what I can't fathom," said Harry, "Is why death eater scum like you would bother coming to school for an education. Surely," Harry leaned casually against the wall, "Avada Kedavra, Crucio and Imperius are the only spells purebloods of your inbred caliber need to know?" Harry flexed his wrist and the wand sprang from its wrist holster, "How about it Malfoy?" Harry took a sudden step forward, putting his face within inches of Malfoys. Their confrontation had drawn a crowd of spectators, "Come on ferret, just like in first year." Harry's face broke in to a malicious grin, "I'll give you a duel, wands only, no contact. Who's your second?"

There was a nervous shuffling of feet behind Malfoy and the blonde haired wizard could not see his cronies taking small steps back away from their "leader." Malfoy flinched ever so slightly, unnerved by Harry's unblinking stare, "A duel, wands only, no contact," Harry said aloud, "I need a second." It took place in the blink of an eye. The six teens suddenly had their wands as they took a step forward, their feet crashing down upon the paving stones.

"Alternatively ferret," said Harry, "Seven wizards plus an Oath breaker versus me and my friends." Malfoy had not even drawn his wand when Harry raised his and dropped in to a duelist stance, and let a spell build, gathering energy upon his wand, "It's a nice, dark green isn't it?" said Harry conversationally, "And you know of precious few spells of this color don't you?"

Malfoy balked and took a step back, nearly tripping over his robes as he fled towards the carriages, taking his cronies with him. Harry pointed his wand at a nearby wall and let the spell fly. The spell struck and covered the lower portion of the wall in olive green paint, "Color change charm," said Harry with a chuckle to the watching crowd, "I can't help but wonder what that idiot thought I was going to do."

The crowd of gaping onlookers stared for a moment and then began to dissipate as Harry turned to his friends, "Now that the ferret is gone, does anybody know what the hell that," he pointed in between the carriage shafts, "is?"

His friends looked at him, confused for a long moment, "what are you talking about?" asked Neville.

Harry rounded on his friends, and he noted that all of them were staring at him, blankly and grabbed Fred who happened to be the closest and planted him face to face with the closest of the horse like creatures. Fred stared forward for a long moment and then looked back at Harry, "Uh... mate, what am I supposed to be looking at?"

"Right there, between the shafts, harnessed to the coach," replied Harry evenly, "It's right there in front of your..." a strange thought occurred to Harry, "You can't see them can you?" Fred shook his head, "Never mind. Let's just, get... going." Harry clambered aboard the coach as Luna joined him in the first coach and nodded to Ginny who took the hint, and directed the others to take different coaches.

Luna plonked herself down on the bench opposite him and met his gaze directly, "You're not going mad or anything. I can see them too." Harry's eyes widened fractionally in surprise, "I've been able to see them since my first day here. They have always pulled the carriages," she hesitated and smiled, "You are as sane as I am." Harry smiled at what would have once been a backhanded compliment less than a year ago from Loony Lovegood, the butt of every joke in Hufflepuff house.

Chapter 32

Of Sorting Hat and Speeches

Harry and Luna watched the castle come in to view, passing between the tall stone winged boar topped pillars on either side of the gates in to the school grounds. He could not help scan the grounds, searching for the pinpricks of light or smoke trail that would mark Hagrid's cabin by the Forbidden Forest. With a murmured spell, he enhanced his night vision, piercing the darkness to find... nothing.

Hogwarts Castle, its mass towers and turrets was jet black against the dark sky, the light blazing from its many windows twinkling lights. He stared at the back of the gaunt skeletal creature, "Luna," he asked quietly, "What are they?"

"Threstrals," she replied airily, "The more fanciful myths and legends say that these are the mounts that the Four Horsemen, the heralds of the Apocalypse," she explained with a shrug. "Those who can see them are those who have seen death and remember it," for the first time she hesitated, "first hand." First hand, that explained why he could see them. He lapsed in to silence and Luna said nothing, letting them complete the ride in silence. They dismounted just outside the great doors that lead in to the entrance hall and awaited the rest of the group.

Together, they crossed the flagstone floor in to the Great Hall and the start- of-term feast. The Great Hall was just as Harry remembered it: Four long tables under a starless black ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. Candles floated in midair all along the tables, illuminating the silvery ghosts who were dotted about the Hall and the faces of the students talking eagerly, exchanging summer news, shouting greetings at friends from other houses, eyeing one another's new haircuts and robes. Again, Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither noticed nor cared.

It was harder to pretend not to notice or care when they moved to sit at the Gryffindor table. They had one end of the table to themselves, with a fair amount of space separating them from even the second years, let alone the students from the upper years. But then, he had more important things to worry about. Specifically the staff table,

"Who's that?" asked Colin, pointing towards the middle of the staff table with an almost lazily raised finger.

Harry stared at Dumbledore for a long moment, though their eyes met for a long moment, Harry did not back down when the headmaster sent a cautious Legilimency probe. His face bore no reaction as he held the headmaster's gaze. The mind probe touched the outmost defenses of his mind, where it was gently repulsed. Harry's own counterattack was the exact opposite as the probe smashed hard in to Dumbledore's shield that made the aged wizard wince. Harry broke off the assault, noting the wince with satisfaction. Perhaps that would teach the old bastard not to try and meddle with his mind.

Harry found the unfamiliar face sitting at the staff table. She was short and squat with curly mousy hair with a pink Alice band that matched a ridiculously fluffy pink cardigan worn over her robes. She turned her face slightly to sip from her goblet, bringing her face in to the light, "Umbridge," growled Harry.

Umbridge had been at his hearing and then a judge at the TriWizard Tournament that concluded with the death of his girlfriend, a friend and fellow champion, and the rebirth of Voldemort.

"Nice cardigan," smirked Colin, "Think I can hex her from here?"

"No," muttered Luna, "There is no one else, so she is it." Luna flicked a lock of hair behind her ear, "That is our new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor."

"And, she works for Fudge," Harry drummed his fingers on the table, wondering what that meant for his long term plans as Professor Grubby-Plank appeared and worked her way along the table to take Hagrid's seat. Moments later, the doors from the Entrance Hall opened to present the unsorted first years. They were a long line of scared faces, led by Professor McGonagall who carried a stool and the ancient Sorting Hat, as heavily patched and darned as ever. She placed the hat and it began to sing. It was another year and the song was different, very different from those of previous years.

In times of old when I was new

And Hogwarts barely started

The Founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted:
United by a common goal,
They had the selfsame yearning
To make the world's best magic school
And pass along their learning.

"Together we will build and teach!"

It was... long to say the least. However, the essence of it was clear to anyone had an ounce of common sense

Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we'll crumble from within
I have told you, I have warned you..
Let the sorting now begin

The Hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured for the first time in Harry's memory, with muttering and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbors, and Harry, clapping along with everyone else, knew exactly what they were talking about, "Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?" said Fred, his eyebrows raised.

"Too right it has," agreed Harry.

The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four Hogwarts houses and its own role in Sorting them. Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before. "I wonder if its ever given warnings before?" said Neville, sounding slightly anxious.

"Yes, indeed," said Nearly Headless Nick knowledgeably, "The Hat, is an extension of the Lady herself, and she believes she is honor-bound to give the school due warning whenever she feels □" Whatever Nick was going to say was cut short by the scorching glare of Professor McGonagall. With a last frowning look that encompassed the four house tables, she unrolled the long piece of parchment and called out the first name, "Abercrombie, Euan."

Slowly, the long line of first-year students thinned and it was not long before the last of the first years was sorted with "Zeller, Rose" joining Hufflepuff House. Professor McGonagall picked up the Hat and stool and marched them away as Dumbledore rose to his feet.

The sight of the headmaster standing there, before the assembled students left Harry uncertain what he should feel about the headmaster as he stood to address the students before the start of the term feast, "To our newcomers," said Dumbledore in a ringing voice, his arms stretched wide and a beaming smile on his lips, "welcome! To our old hands □ welcome back! There is a time for speech-making, but this is not it. Tuck in!"

There was an appreciative laugh and an outbreak of applause as Dumbledore sat down neatly and threw his long beard over his shoulder so as to keep it out of the way of his plate as food appeared, leaving the five tables groaning under the weight of food and beverages. They began helping themselves as Luna turned her attention back to Nearly Headless Nick, "What were you saying about the Hat giving warnings?"

"I have heard the Hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always it has given the same advice: Find strength within and stand together."

Colin had helped himself to the mashed potatoes, paused with his fork midway to his mouth, "How can the hat know if the school is in danger?"

The ghost smiled, almost affectionately, "You forget that Hogwarts is no mere building. The amount of magic from those living within her makes her alive, and aware of not just her surroundings, but also grants her an awareness of events in the wider wizarding world, but she is still just a building."

"And she wants the houses to unite and stand together?" said Harry as Colin snorted in disgust at the mere mention of such cooperation. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and shook his head, "I'd rather kiss a pig."

There were chuckles around their end of the table as they easily blocked out the stares, whispered comments and finger pointing in their direction. Harry was used to the banter and playful bickering between Ginny, Luna and the twins and knew better than to get in the middle of that fiasco. He spent the time chewing his way steadily through a number of roasted chicken legs and a large helping of his favorite treacle tart.

The students were finished eating and the noise level in the Great Hall was creeping upwards when Dumbledore got to his feet and began with the usual round of notices regarding the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade weekends and Filch's four hundred and sixty second warning about magic in the corridors and the banned products list. He had heard it all before and easily tuned it out, idly wondering about the four poster bed in his dormitory and how comfortable it would be to just curl up under the blanket with Crookshanks on his feet. With a pang he realized that he was looking at a lot of nights without Fleur and he shuddered involuntarily at that thought. Fortunately, there was a way around that, "...fessor Umbridge, our new Defense against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was a round of polite but unenthusiastic applause as Dumbledore continued, "Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the □" He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, 'Hem, hem,' and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, and then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the

students were smirking, echoing Harry's own thoughts that the bitch did not know how things are at Hogwarts.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Professor Umbridge simpered, "for those kind words of welcome." Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and a little-girlish and again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough and continued. "Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!" She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. "And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!"

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old, "Somebody," muttered Harry grimly to his friends, "is going to have to teach her to keep her forked tongue behind her teeth."

"I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!" everyone was exchanging barely concealed grins, especially the twins. Harry realized that he had just given the Prank Masters - all three of them license to bring their own brand of warfare to bear.

When she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them, "The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished..."

Harry found his attentiveness waning and wishing someone would throw something at her. He felt his brain was slipping in and out of consciousness, as did, just about everyone else except for a few who seemed to possess an innate ability to counter such soporific drivel.

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again. "Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating," he said, bowing to her. "Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held..."

"Yes, it certainly was illuminating," said Luna, in her usual dreamy fashion. Colin nodded his agreement as did Neville and Harry felt a sense of relief that a number of them had actually managed to stay focused. He'd given up pretty quickly.

"You're going to have to..." said George as he suppressed a yawn

"fill the two... three of us in then," completed Fred and he did yawn and try to shake himself awake.

"Four," added Harry.

"Five," said Neville

"I know what they mean," agreed Ginny, "We grew up with Percy and this out does Perfect Percy by a few hundred miles."

"Well," said Luna airily, "all it basically means is that the Ministry is interfering at Hogwarts." There was a great clattering and banging all around them. Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Harry caught more than one gaze dart in his direction and the groundswell of muttering and more than one cautiously pointed finger as he stood and prepared to join the crowd of students heading to their respective dormitories.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily. Of course, everyone was staring at him; he had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months previously, clutching the body of his girlfriend, the wand of a deceased champion and there had been no real official explanation. The summer holiday had started, everyone had been sent home where they had listened, to read and been pummeled in to submission by the crap from the Daily Prophet.

Harry had debated the idea with Fleur and both Marinashka and Griphook had concurred, "To control the media, is to control the mind." He had hoped that his actions the year before would have stuck with some of the students, but it had not. Barring his friends, he realized and the few members of the Order of the Phoenix he now had on his side he faced an uphill battle. No, not an uphill battle... he faced a war on two fronts: Against the Ministry. Against Voldemort. And he was not sure which one was the greater threat.

Harry had reached the end of the corridor to the Gryffindor common room and came to a halt in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady with a start. He didn't know the new password. He stared up at the Fat Lady who smoothed folds of her pink satin dress and looked down at him, "no password, normally means no entrance," she winked, "But for a friend of the Lady of the Castle, no password is necessary." Her portrait began to swing open towards them when Harry caught the edge of the frame.

"Thank you." He said, missing the look of polite surprise as he climbed through the portrait hole. The Gryffindor common room was the same as ever: overstuffed sofas, dilapidated squashy arm chairs and rickety old tables. With a start, he realized that he had not set foot inside for a long time. A fire was crackling merrily in the grate and few were warming their hands by the blaze. "Where's Colin?" he asked suddenly.

"Walking Luna to Ravenclaw." He nodded good night to his friends and ascended the stairs to the dormitories, in not much of a talking mood, with Neville a few paces behind.

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had reached the dormitory first and were in the process of covering the walls beside their beds with posters and photographs. They had been talking as Harry pushed open the door but stopped abruptly the moment they saw him. Harry wondered whether they had been talking about him, then whether he was being paranoid. "Hi," he said, moving across to his own trunk and opening it.

"Hey, Harry," said Dean, who was putting on a pair of pyjamas in the West Ham colors, "Good holiday?"

"Not bad," muttered Harry, as a true account of his holiday would have taken most of the night to relate and he could not face it. "You?"

"Yeah, it was OK," chuckled Dean. "Better than Seamus's, anyway, he was just telling me."

"Why, what happened, Seamus?" Neville asked as he placed his *Mimulus mimbletonia* on his bedside cabinet.

Seamus did not answer immediately; he was making rather a meal of ensuring that his poster of the Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch team was quite straight. Then he said, with his back still turned to Harry, "Me mam didn't want me to come back."

"What?" said Harry, pausing in the act of pulling off his robes.

"She didn't want me to come back to Hogwarts." Seamus turned away from his poster and pulled his own pajamas out of his trunk, still not looking at Harry.

"But □ why?" Harry knew that Seamus's mother was a witch but it took only a few minutes for him to put all the pieces of the puzzle in to place.

Seamus did not answer until he had finished buttoning his pajamas, "Well," he said in a measured voice, "I suppose... because of you."

Neville took two steps back and let his wand snap in to his hand, "What d'you mean," said Harry quietly, "Because of me?" His heart was beating rather fast. He felt vaguely as though something was closing in on him.

"Well," said Seamus again, still avoiding Harry's gaze, "She... er... well, it's not just you, it's Dumbledore, too..."

"She believes the Daily Prophet?" said Harry. "She thinks I'm a liar and Dumbledore's an old fool?"

Seamus looked up at him, meeting the emerald stare for the first time and nodded hesitantly, and then more firmly as if making his mind up, "Yeah, something... exactly like that."

Mindless bunch of brain dead sheep, thought Harry bitterly as he turned his back on Seamus and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. It was not working. He was sick of it. Harry Potter: Hero of the day one minute and scum of the earth the other twenty three hours and fifty nine minutes of it. Mrs. Finnigan had no idea, the stupid woman, he thought savagely.

"Look... what did happen that night when... you know, when... with Cedric and Hermione all?" Seamus sounded nervous and eager at the same time. Dean, who had been bending over his trunk trying to retrieve a slipper, went oddly still and Harry knew he was listening.

Harry whirled round, "The fuck, you asking me?" snapped Harry, "Read the Daily Prophet like your mother. You can read it all there! Tell you everything that you could possibly not need to know!"

"Don't you have a go at my mother!" Seamus snapped back

Harry's wand was suddenly in hand, "Tell you what," growled Harry, "I'll have a go at anyone who challenges my honor! I'll have a go at anyone that calls me a liar! I'll have a go at anyone I feel like having go at!" The other three boys in the dorm suddenly realized that the temperature inside the tower had dropped remarkably. Sure enough ice crystals had formed, freezing from the walls, floor and the nearest dresser, "So act like a man, or act your age and go to McGonagall and see if you can be moved!" Harry blinked, "You know what, screw this you can stay, I'm outta here!"

The truth was that the argument with Seamus had truly shaken him. It had never occurred to him just how many people saw him as exactly what the Daily Prophet made him out to be; lying and mentally unhinged. For a moment, he wondered how Dumbledore had fared, considering he had first lost his position as chief whatever on the Wizangamot and then lost his position amongst the International Confederation of Wizards. They were both in similar boats, but he could not afford to fight war on three fronts at once: Voldemort, the Ministry, and Dumbledore. His list of enemies continued to grow, but the list of allies and friends seemed to grow shorter.

Harry wondered just how many more Seamus's were running around Hogwarts as he entered the flooded, out of order bathroom on the second floor. At the end of his previous semester, the entry

had been sealed and a complex ward scheme applied by the goblins. As their champion however, it took only a drop of his blood to unseal the wards and gain access to the Chamber of Secrets.

He descended in to the bedrock beneath the castle to find that his home, from the Triwizard tournament was as he left it. He strolled through the wards and found Hermione's old room. A wave of his hand saw a blazing fire come to life in the hearth. Harry himself was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Chapter 33

SNAFU

It was a quiet morning, when Harry emerged from the flooded second floor bathroom and made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast. He was not surprised to find his friends waiting for him, "Morning," he said, "Waiting long?"

"Oh yes," said Fred with a serious nod.

"Could eat the breakfast for the entire house." concluded George.

Harry stopped for a moment, wondering who had said what, "One day, I'm going to figure out which of you is which." They were in decent spirits as they wandered into Great Hall.

As they walked, they found themselves obviously the subject of conversation amongst the students of all four houses, not that Harry paid them any notice at all. At least he pretended not to pay them any notice, but his friends were well aware that Harry was keeping an eye on everyone, watching who was talking, and talking about him.

Angelina Johnson stopped him suddenly and he matched her gaze. There was a fire and passion in her eyes. So it had happened, "Angelina," he greeted her, "Made Gryffindor Quidditch Captain?" She nodded briskly, "Nice one." If nothing else, her pep talks would not be as long-winded as those of the former Captain Oliver Wood.

"We need a new keeper," she said bluntly, "Tryouts are on Friday at five o'clock and I want the whole team there. We need to make sure that the new person really fits the team."

"Ok," said Harry. At least that was something he could look forward to... as a distraction. Angelina smiled and with a brisk nod departed. He turned to his Fred and George, "Forgot Wood had left," said Ginny, "But some new blood on the team won't hurt our chances, will it?"

"I suppose," said Neville, taking the bench opposite, "He was a good Keeper." The wave of owls soared in through the upper windows,

fluttering down all over the great hall, bringing letters and packages along with a little drizzle of water. It was clearly raining hard outside.

To everyone's surprise, a damp barn owl fluttered to rest next to Luna, a soaked Daily Prophet in its beak. "Keeping tabs on the rest of the wizarding world," said Luna, "Everyone here knows that if you want the truth, you should be reading The Quibbler."

True enough, "Luna," said Harry, "We need to get in touch with your father about another exclusivity deal... one that will protect all of us. If they can't say anything about me, they are more than likely to start on everyone around me, just to provoke a reaction."

"I'll send Dad an owl," said Luna as she buried herself in the paper, "Morning Professor McGonagall."

"Morning Ms. Lovegood," replied the Transfiguration Professor and head of Gryffindor, "Professor Flitwick asked me to pass this to you," she said, handing Luna her timetable, she stopped and leaned over, "Be aware of Delores Umbridge," she muttered, "She has taken issue with Luna being away from her house to Professor Flitwick." She handed out their timetables and moved along.

"History of Magic, double Potions, Divination and double Defense against the Dark Arts," said Harry, "Gonna be a fun filled day for me."

"Look on the bright side;" said Neville, "At least we can suffer together."

"A shame that our latest invention..." began Fred as Harry helped himself to the stack of toast and a glass of pumpkin juice. He froze for a moment: The memory slammed in to him with the force of a hammer. He shook it off and got on with breakfast, abandoning the toast in favor of sausages.

"... is not quite perfect yet..." agreed George.

"... as the Skiving Snackboxes would get you out of class," concluded Fred.

"And why would any of us want to do that?" asked Ginny.

"Well, for Luna and yourself, Gin-gin, it's just another year at Hogwarts," said Fred.

"But for Harry and Neville," continued George, "Its fifth year, and OWLs."

"Your noses will be pressed to the grindstone so hard they'll be rubbed raw and bleeding," said Fred with genuine sympathy. That worried Harry.

"Minor breakdowns in half our year," said George, "Tears, Tantrums, fainting fits..."

"Nosebleeds, panic attacks, a fit of boils," confirmed Fred.

"It is a nightmare year, the fifth," concluded George, "If you care about exam results anyway..." he drained the last of his pumpkin juice and made ready to leave.

"Yeah and you two... didn't," said Ginny, putting her fork and knife down, "Mum was less than happy with your results... three OWLs each."

"Least we came back to see things through," the twins chorused as people began leaving the Great Hall for this first class of the term.

"You did the right thing," said Ginny grimly, "especially since perfect Percy turning in to the world's biggest idiot, taking a job as Fudge's bootlicker."

"Yes, well we don't intend to waste our last year here," said Fred as he looked around the Great Hall affectionately, "We're going to use the time to do some market research..."

"Find out what Hogwarts students want from a joke shop, the kinds of products and then make those to fit the demand," concluded George. Nobody needed to ask where the money to get started had originated. Their summer time showdown had let that particular cat out of the bag, to the displeasure of Molly Weasley. The twins bade the others farewell, hoping to sell a few products before their own Herbology lesson kicked off in Greenhouse Six.

"Is it really that tough?" asked Harry, "I mean, don't get me wrong, I reckon I could handle the Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense without breaking a sweat... but the others..."

"Know what you mean, I reckon I could do Herbology the way you do Defense," said Neville with a shrug, "but you know, it might not be a bad idea to setup some kind of study group. We start now; it'll make things easier."

"That is a good idea," said Luna, emerging at last from behind the pages of the Prophet, "Nothing about you or Dumbledore in here today." She continued as if she hadn't just diverted on a slight tangent, "There's also the careers advice later this year so you know what NEWTs you should sign up for."

They rose to head for their respective classes, with only Neville walking with Harry as they made their way to the History of Magic classroom, "Any thoughts about what you're going to do after Hogwarts?"

Harry shrugged, "Not given it much thought. The way my life goes..."

"You wonder if you'll live long enough?" asked Neville quietly. Harry blinked, "I know it's been hard on you. These past few months and all," he said awkwardly, "And I know you've confided in Fleur about things." Harry opened his mouth to object, "No. I understand why you can..." he gestured for a word, and for the umpteenth time, Harry wondered where Neville got the insights that let him put two and two together to arrive correctly at twenty-two, "talk to Fleur about all this. She was a Champion, she was with you in a way none of us were, or ever can be."

"Neville," asked Harry, "Any seer blood in your family?"

They shared a grin for a moment as they stepped in to what was one of the few things Slytherins and every other house could agree on: The worst conceived subject in the history of wizarding kind. Taught by the ghost Professor Binns, his wheezy droning voice caused severe drowsiness within five minutes in warm and three in cold weather. Most were unable to take notes as they gazed sleepily into space as the ghostly professor droned on about giant wars for

an hour and a half. Harry finally decided this was an OWL exam to sleep through.

The pair were walking down the corridor leisurely making their way to their next class, when someone walked around the corner towards them, "Hello, Harry!"

Cho Chang, alone without the usual gang of giggling girls that followed her around, "Cho," said Harry evenly. At least he was not covered in stinksap this time. He eyed her critically for a moment, "So, have a good summer?"

"Oh... it was alright," Harry nodded, "Something I can help you with?"

She was fidgety, nervous about something, "Look , can we talk? In private?" With a nod to Neville, they stepped in to an empty classroom and Harry had the room warded and sealed before Cho had the chance to turn around. "Something I can help you with?" he asked coolly.

The frosty demeanor took Cho aback; "Harry, I want you to know that..." she was not sure, how to put in to words what she wanted to say, "Last year, I let things get... out of hand... with me and Cedric and all of the words," the words rushed from her, "I'm sorry for whatever part I played in that."

Harry eyed her for a long moment then pushed himself off the desk he had been leaning against, "Apology not accepted." She blinked in surprise at the simple, curt dismissal, "And you want to know why." It was a statement, not a question, "Luna Lovegood." He said simply, "She has been the butt of your pranks and jokes for the past four years." Cho stood standing with her mouth open wide in surprise and disbelief, "I heard about you trying to go one on one with Luna last year. So, you want forgiveness. Start with Luna."

With a snap of his fingers the wards upon the door collapsed and as he crossed the room, he decided not to leave things at that, "I don't give a damn about your love life, but leave me out of it." He threw the remark over his shoulder, "Because I'm not available." The last comment was right on the money as far as Harry was concerned, what with the way Cho stopped up short, almost as if she had tripped over her shoe laces and robes.

His mood relatively uneven, the ominous sound of Snape's dungeon door did nothing to worsen his mood, even as the greasy git flew in to the room with his black robes billowing, but like as ever, "Settle down." Said Snape coldly, shutting the door behind him. Say whatever you want to say about the man but his voice was all it took to silence the entire class, "Before we begin today's lesson, it is appropriate to remind all of you that you will be sitting your OWL examination regarding the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic," he paused and let his gaze linger on Neville, "or incompetent" his gaze shifted to Harry, "as you are, most of you will scrape an "Acceptable" in your OWL or suffer my... righteous indignation and displeasure."

His eyes rested on Harry and his lip curled back in disgust, "Fortunately, many of you will not be in my NEWT Potions class, so some of us will be saying goodbye." Harry glared back feeling a dark pleasure that he would be able to give up potions forever, "However, we must first survive another year of each other before that happy moment of farewell," he said softly, "So concentrate and perhaps you will brew the Draught of Peace. It is a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. A mistake can lead to catatonia. The ingredients and method," Snape flicked his wand, "are on the blackboard and you know where the ingredients are stored. You have an hour and a half."

The potion was a complicated, fiddly and required what felt like excessive fine tuning as to when you could add ingredients, and the stirring clockwise and counterclockwise along with flame and temperature adjustments. "You should have a light silver vapor rising from your... potions," the last word had been sneered.

Harry had given up sometime before, with what appeared to be grey storm clouds hovering over his cauldron. Ron at the back and surrounded by Slytherins spat green sparks, as Neville's silver potion bubbled ominously. Sure enough, silence enveloped the dungeon as Snape stopped and looked down at it with a leer firmly plastered to his face, "Potter, what is this supposed to be?"

"Draught of Peace," said Harry as he raised his Occlumency barriers to full strength, locking his emotions away.

"Can't read Potter?" said Snape softly, "Read the third line."

"Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counter-clockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes then add two drops of Syrup of Hellebore." Harry met the gaze of the Potions Professor for the first time that term, "Forgot to add the Syrup of Hellebore."

Snape's leer became a vindictive grin as the potions master raised his wand, "I know what you did Potter, and this mess is utterly worthless, Evanesce." His cauldron emptied, Snape turned to the rest of the class, "Those of you who can read, fill one flagon, label it with your name and bring it up to my desk." Harry began packing his ingredients away, "Homework: Twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion making, for next Thursday."

Harry was the first out the dungeon when the bell rang and rounded a corner in to an empty classroom. "Dobby. Winky." His house elves appeared before him, "Inform my friends that the residence is open, if they wish to join me."

Within ten minutes, his friends were gathered in the second floor toilet where Harry added his friends to the ward scheme, ensuring that they could access not only the serpentine tunnel but the chamber itself. "Same rules as last year," said Harry, "Welcome anytime, day or night. Just remember that some rooms are private and off limits."

The Residence kitchen was fully stocked, courtesy of goblins of Gringotts who, as always, never did anything halfway. While rain lashed down upon the castle and its attendant grounds, the group of friends caught up over their first few classes of the term as they worked their way through Dobby and Winky's cooking.

"So the bat git is still as bat like as ever," said Colin, "him and batman would have quite a few things in common now."

Harry laughed, "I'll explain that to you all sometime." He said to those with confused expressions on their faces.

"That's not the half of it," said Neville, "At least Harry had a potion. Goyle's concoction ate through the glass of his flagon and set his robes on fire."

The enmity between Harry and Snape had been at least fifteen years in the making and solidified the moment Harry set foot in Hogwarts for his sorting. "And that greasy git," thought Harry, "Is supposed to be a spy for...our... for the Order of the Plucked Chicken lead by the Great Albus Dumbledore." He had as much in the fragmented memories stolen from Dumbledore's pensieve the year before, "can't trust either of 'em."

"Well at least he did turn spy for the light," said Luna, "It's a matter of public record that Dumbledore testified on Snape's behalf, making the man's allegiance clear," said Luna thoughtfully, "Other people have to know something about it, otherwise I don't see how Snape could have gotten a job at Hogwarts...speaking of jobs," said Luna. She pulled a wad of parchment from her pocket and handed it to Harry, "From my father, to you, for the Quibbler."

He straightened out the mass of parchment and read through it, "Exactly the same as last years' eh Luna?"

"Why change what works?" she countered, "The same deal applies to all of us once we sign." That explained why the stack instead of a single sheet, "I was thinking that we could get Griphook and the Quibbler's lawyers to sign off on it. Give it some real sharp teeth..."

"Given that the Prophet has been going to town on both you and Dumbledore about the memory you let slip during the trial..." Ginny let the end of the sentence trail off in to silence. The Prophet had gone on an all out blitz and the Quibbler had been left hanging. A mistake that Harry vowed he would not repeat again.

As the lunch hour drew to an end, he made his way to the trapdoor at the top of the North Tower and was the first to ascend the ladder in to Sybill Trelawney's classroom. Harry found himself wondering why he had bothered to sign up for this complete waste of time, when the reason crawled through the trap door: Ron Weasley with his friend Seamus. This was one class he would have to suffer through alone. "To think I signed up for this tripe with that...traitor," Harry made a note to be around when Ron got what was coming to him.

A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls with glittering strings of beads, reminded Harry of some insect once again predicted the death of a student, gazing pointedly in Harry's direction. He

responded by yawning loudly at the prediction but the low lighting from the scarf covered lamps and sickly scented fire place seemed to hide him completely from view. He tuned out much of what Trelawney said, and idly flipped through and cursed his luck when the odd number of students in the class left him partnering Trelawney.

"Come now my dear," she said, "I can interpret your dreams, only if you will give me a dream to interpret." Harry remained silent, wondering how much more of this kind of shit he was going to have to put up with, "I am sure that you have dreams about what happened last year..."

To her surprise, and his own, Harry gave a simple tight nod, "So what if I am?"

"Well, you don't need those dreams interpreted do you," she said quietly and with a start, he realized that her voice had lost its aura of otherworldliness, "You face a long road, and it is a hard road. And it is wrong," she said, "Wrong that a child, however mature, however capable, should be burdened with such.... responsibility." Harry stared at her in surprise, "I know divination seems, wishy-washy to many and with good reason. And there are times, when not only do I wish I lacked the Inner Eye, but that I had not seen the things I have seen."

"So why do you discredit your own art by making it seem so wishy-washy?" asked Harry quietly.

"Divination... is like time. The events we foresee may or may not take place, but the more people believe in it, the more likely what we foresee will come to pass. Because people will make choices to make what they believe will happen actually happen. This makes all prophecies in to reality instead of having them as the most possible outcomes." She sighed "And not all prophecies are good in the time that they are told or event when those events have unfolded."

"Time..." said Harry suddenly, "Time magic?" he asked. The slight widening of Trelawney's eyes was easily visible through her glasses which simply over-magnified the slight motion, "Your great-great-grandmother was a famous seer, Cassandra." Harry shook his head and echoed a question Fleur had once asked, "How are the banking relations?"

Sybill chortled ever so slightly, "Doing well. Give my regards to Griphook - we are acquainted - next time you see him, Urush-kai and, may the fates line your path with gold and the remains of your vanquished enemies. "

"May the fates be as kind to you," he replied, she rose to her feet, when Harry had to ask, "Why do you predict my death constantly?" She smiled over her shoulder at him, and with a slight shake of her head, left Harry to ponder that question.

The lesson was not a double and as he clambered down the ladder, Harry tallied up the amount of homework and realized it was growing from molehill in to mountain: twelve inches on moonstones for Snape, eighteen inches for Binns on giant wars, a month long dream diary from Trelawney. All that remained was Defense against the Dark Arts.

Professor Umbridge was already seated when the students arrived, clad in a fluffy pink cardigan, sporting a black velvet bow on her head. "She really looks like a toad with a fly sitting on her head." He mused as he took his seat.

"Well, good afternoon!" she said, when finally the whole class had sat down. A few people mumbled in reply, "Tut, tut," said Professor Umbridge. "That won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply "Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge". One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!"

"Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge," they chanted back at her.

"There, now," said Professor Umbridge sweetly. "That wasn't too difficult, was it?"

Wands away and quills out, please." It was at that exact moment that Harry knew that the muggle saying acronym "SNAFU" was going to be an apt description of this class. Umbridge tapped the board with an unusually short wand where words appeared at once:

"Defense Against the Dark Arts A Return to Basic Principles."

This was followed by three course aims as she blathered on about "disrupted and fragmented teaching," "not seem to have followed

any Ministry-approved curriculum" and "following a carefully structured, theory-centred, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic..."

"Has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

Though she insisted on treating them like first years, the students had caught on quick to the way this woman wanted her class to run, though Harry stayed quiet, trying to keep his emotions in check as "Yes, Professor Umbridge," rang through the room.

"Good," said Professor Umbridge. "I should like you to turn to page five and read

"Chapter One, Basics for Beginners". There will be no need to talk." Professor Umbridge left the blackboard and settled herself in the chair behind the teacher's desk, observing them all closely with those pouchy toad's eyes.

Harry raised his hand without even bothering to open the book, "Is there a problem with my instructions Mr. Potter?"

"Nope," said Harry, "I've got a question about your course aims, about the use of actual magic for defense against the dark arts," putting air quotes around the word defense.

"Using magic?" she said with the same high pitched girlish laugh. It had grated at his trial in August, and now it still had the same nails on chalkboard quality. Professor Umbridge gave another little laugh. "Why, you surely aren't expecting to be attacked during class?"

"We're not going to use magic?" asked Neville.

"Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr-?"

"Longbottom," replied Neville thrusting his hand in to the air, "Surely the whole point of Defence Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?"

"Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Mr. Longbottom?" asked Professor Umbridge in her falsely sweet voice.

"No, but –"

"And neither is Mr. Potter. In fact, neither of you are qualified to decide what or how to teach any class at Hogwarts. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure risk-free way -"

"The hell is the point of that," said Harry, silencing the entire class, "When we are attacked, it won't be in a safe, secure, risk free..."

Professor Umbridge promptly turned away from him, but now several other people had their hands up, too, "And your name is?" Professor Umbridge asked.

"Dean Thomas."

"Well, Mr. Thomas?"

"Well, it's like Harry said, isn't it?" said Dean,, "If we're going to be attacked, it won't be risk free."

"I repeat," said Professor Umbridge, smiling in a very irritating fashion at Dean, "Do you expect to be attacked during my classes?"

"No, but - "

Professor Umbridge talked over him, "I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school," she said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth, "But you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed - not to mention," she gave a nasty little laugh, "extremely dangerous half-breeds."

"If you mean Professor Lupin," piped up Dean angrily, "he was the best we ever –"

"Hand, Mr Thomas! As I was saying - you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day -"

"No we haven't," said Neville, "We just - "

"Your hand is not up, Mr. Longbottom!"

He put up his hand as Umbridge turned away from him "It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, and he actually performed them on you."

"Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn't he?" said Dean hotly, "Mind you, we still learned loads."

"Your hand is not up, Mr Thomas!" trilled Professor Umbridge, "Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?' she added, staring at Parvati, whose hand had just shot up.

"Parvati Patil. Isn't there a practical part in our Defense against the Dark Arts

OWL? Aren't we supposed to show that we can actually do the counter-curses?"

"As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions," said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

"Without ever practicing them beforehand?' said Parvati incredulously, "Are you

telling us that the first time we'll get to do the spells will be during our exam?"

"I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough –"

"And what good's theory going to be in the real world?" said Harry loudly, his fist

in the air again.

Professor Umbridge looked up, "This is school, Mr Potter, not the real world," she said softly.

"So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting for us out there?"

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter."

"Oh, yeah?" said Harry. His temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the surface all day, was reaching boiling point. His eyes flashed a dangerous emerald green.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" enquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

"Hmm, let's think..." said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice. "Maybe... Lord

Voldemort..." A number of gasps and screams echoed through the gathered students as Professor Umbridge grasped the edge of table, "his death eaters for another," he continued, "And your memory is remarkably short," he ground out, "My three ring circus trial was less than a month ago and you forgot what you saw? Oh yeah. A couple of Dementors too!"

She was staring at Harry with a grimly satisfied expression on her face, "Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter." The classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Umbridge or Harry, "Now, let me make a few things quite plain," Professor Umbridge stood up and leaned towards them, her stubby-fingered hands splayed on her desk, "You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead..."

"He wasn't dead," said Harry angrily, "and, he has returned!"

"Mr-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-house-ten-points-do-not-make-matters-

worse-for-yourself," said Professor Umbridge in one breath without looking at him, "As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie."

"It is NOT a lie!" said Harry,

"Detention, Mr. Potter!" said Professor Umbridge triumphantly. "Tomorrow evening. Five o'clock. My office. I repeat, this is a lie.

The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading."

Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk. Harry, however, stood up. Everyone was staring at him; Seamus looked half-scared, half-fascinated. "Harry, no!" whispered Neville, tugging at his sleeve, but he jerked out of his friends grip.

"So according to you, the Ministry and Fudge," growled Harry, "Cedric Diggory accidentally cast Avada Kedavra on himself? According to you, Hermione Jane Granger tortured herself to the brink of death and killed herself with Avada Kedavra?" his voice shook, and the furniture in the classroom began to vibrate gently on its own as the class took a collective breath. No one had heard the details of that night from Harry. And those who were in the know had refused to speak on the subject as well, then and now.

"Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident," she said coldly, "As was Herm..."

"I could push you down a flight of stairs, and call it a tragic but happy accident, but anyone with two brain cells would know it was murder!" he spat, He could feel himself shaking. He had hardly spoken to anyone about this, least of all thirty eagerly listening classmates. "Voldemort, killed Cedric Diggory, tortured and killed my former girlfriend Hermione Jane Granger. And what's worse is that you know it's true."

Professor Umbridge's face was quite blank. For a moment, Harry thought she was going to scream at him. Then she said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice, "Come here, Mr. Potter, dear."

"Don't call me "dear," ever again," snapped Harry, "Mr. Potter is the only form of address that I will accept and acknowledge coming from you."

"I said, come here!" she half shouted at him. He stood his ground and just glared back. If a look could kill, Umbridge would have received a half dozen killing curses right between the eyes, "You

deliberately insolent... disobedient... boy!" Harry walked around his desk and leaned against it. He could feel the rest of the class holding its breath. He felt so angry he did not care what happened next but was almost delighted when Umbridge pulled her wand. He tensed ever so slightly, and prayed she would actually cast something at him.

Unfortunately Professor Umbridge also pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretched it out on the desk, dipped her quill into a bottle of ink and started scribbling, hunched over so that Harry could not see what she was writing.

Nobody spoke. After a minute or so she rolled up the parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that he could not open it and threw it at him. It landed at his feet, "Take that to Professor McGonagall," said Professor Umbridge.

He looked at the roll of parchment and flicked his wand in to his hand. He stared at the toad at the front of the room, and levitated the parchment scroll so that it was about ten inches ahead of him, "With pleasure." He hoisted his bag on to his shoulder and spun on his heel, letting the door slam so hard it cracked.

He turned the corner and walked slap into Peeves the poltergeist, a wide-mouthed little man floating on his back in midair, juggling several inkwells, "Why it's Potter!" cackled Peeves, allowing two of the inkwells to fall to the ground where they smashed and splattered the walls with ink.

Harry jumped backwards out of the way with a snarl, "Get out of it, Peeves."

"Feeling cranky Potter?" said Peeves as he floated high above Harry and followed him at a distance, "What is it this time, my fine friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Speaking in - " Peeves blew a gigantic raspberry "tongues?" Peeves slid down the banister on his back beside him. "Oh, most think you're barking mad, but Peeves knows better, and says he has every right to be mad," Harry stopped and stared at the still floating poltergeist, "The Lady of Hogwarts has made clear that you speak the truth. Call upon the castle's ghosts in your time of dire need and we shall aide however we may!" the poltergeist vanished through the wall as the door to his left flew open and Professor McGonagall emerged from her office looking grim and

slightly harassed, "Mr. Potter?" she asked, "Why aren't you in class?"

He gestured to the levitating note, "From Professor Umbridge."

Professor McGonagall took it from him, frowning, slit it open with a tap of her wand, stretched it out and began to read. Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind their square spectacles as she read what Umbridge had written, and with each line they became narrower, "Come in Mr. Potter."

He followed her inside her study. The door closed automatically behind him. "Harry," she said, dropping the formality, "Is this true?"

"Is what true?" Harry asked, rather more aggressively than he had intended, "Professor?" he added, in an attempt to sound more polite.

"Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"You called her a liar?"

"Yes."

"You told her He Who Must Not Be... Voldemort is back ?"

"Yes."

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, watching Harry closely, she waved her wand, conjuring the ever pleasant platter of tea and cookies, "Sit down Harry, and have a biscuit."

"Have - what?"

"Have a biscuit," she repeated indicating the array of biscuits. In a past life, he remembered expecting to be whipped or caned by Professor McGonagall and had instead been appointed by her to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He felt just as confused and wrong-footed as he had done on that occasion.

Professor McGonagall set down Professor Umbridge's note and looked very

Serious, "Harry, you need to be careful." He swallowed his mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her. Her tone of voice was not at all what he was used to; it was not brisk, crisp and stern; it was low and anxious and somehow much more... human than usual, "Misbehavior in Dolores Umbridge's class could cost you much more than house points and a detention."

Harry nodded mutely, "You know where she comes from, you must know to whom she is reporting." The bell rang for the end of the lesson. Overhead and all around was the elephantine sounds of hundreds of students on the move, "It says here she's given you detention every evening this week, starting tomorrow," Professor McGonagall said, looking down at Umbridge's note again, "She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o'clock tomorrow for the first one. Just remember: tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge."

"But I was telling the truth!" said Harry, outraged. "Voldemort is back. Even Dumbledore admits it freely!"

"For heaven's sake, Potter!" said Professor McGonagall, straightening her glasses angrily, having winced at the sound of Voldemort. Harry was sure that her reaction was more habitual reaction than actual fear, "Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It's about keeping your head down and your temper under control!"

She stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin and Harry stood up, too.

"Have another biscuit," she said irritably, thrusting the tin at him, "Didn't you listen to Dolores Umbridge's speech at the start-of-term feast, Potter?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "Yeah... she said... progress will be prohibited or... well, it means that... that the Ministry of Magic is trying to interfere at Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall eyed him closely for a moment, then sniffed, walked around her desk and held open the door for him. "Well, I'm glad you listen to your friends at any rate." she said, pointing him out of her office.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts," muttered Harry to himself, "Situation Normal: All Fucked Up." He shook his head, sometimes, even Dudley, could get things he knew nothing about right.

Chapter 34

The Devils You Know.

Dinner in the Great Hall was not pleasant: Word about his shouting match with Umbridge, along with the ensuing punishment had travelled like lightning around the school, breaking the set record for gossip and rumor mongering. The record for "blown out of all proportion" was also shattered for the first time in over a century. What made it worse still was that all of Slytherin were shouting about it, clearly trying to provoke a reaction that would get Harry in to even more trouble and hopefully reveal the whole story.

"He says he saw Cedric murdered..."

"...dueled You-Know-Who to a draw..."

"...killed them rather than saw them killed is more like it...."

"Says that Voldemort is reborn..."

"not safe to be his friend... look at Colin Creevey..."

The hall descended in to silence when Harry stormed to his feet and stalked out. His hands were shaking too much to be held steady. His friends gave him a few minutes head start and then went down to the residence where he was taking full advantage of the training facilities, reducing training dummies in to matchsticks and kindling. He barely worked up a sweat as he maintained a wandless shield with his left hand, while casting a string of cutting and blasting and bombardment curses.

They left him to it and when he joined them he had taken a shower and looked calmer than he had appeared all day, "What I don't get is why they all believed what Dumbledore said two months ago and now," he shrugged, "they think we're both round the bend."

"It's simple Harry," said Luna, "they just don't know what to believe, and are not sure who they want to believe. If they believe Dumbledore, then everything they have worked for over the past fifteen years is threatened."

"If they believe the ministry" said Neville "then everything is just business as usual."

Fred stared at George, and his twin nodded back, "Harry, we believe you. We, like everyone here, saw you come back with Cedric's Wand, and Hermione..."

"But you have to try and look at it from the outside," said George, "You arrived back in the middle of the grounds, holding Hermione's body, Cedric's wand and nothing else. Nobody saw what happened in the maze. All anyone has to go on, is Dumbledore's word."

"Viktor still won't share his memories of the maze," said Luna quietly, "Your memories are considered fabrications."

"We know they are true," added Colin, "I know you're telling the truth. But nobody had time to process, or comprehend that truth," he was bitter, "My parents... my brother didn't believe it, even though I kept trying to tell them it was true."

Colin was looking at Harry, his voice even, but he was not seeing any of them, "I went out to dinner that night at a muggle friend's house to get away from my own family. We'd just fought again, them believing the Prophet, not Dumbledore. I couldn't be convinced the Ministry had it right." He blinked, wrenching himself back to the present, "Everyone goes home for the summer, spends two months reading and hearing what? You're a nutcase, Dumbledore's just as crazy." He finished, "You wonder why no one believes you?"

"My family, Harry," he said quietly, "Are the first casualties in the coming war. It's a war most are not prepared to fight, and are only ready to lose." Crookshanks meowed and leapt up in to Colin's lap, and the seated friends gazed in to the fire for a long moment. Barely a day back and already Hogwarts was not the place, the sanctuary he used to think it was. Harry gazed into the flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

"And we've met the latest defense professor," said Neville, "we're supposed to fail our OWL with her idea of teaching, and refusal to let us do magic."

"Not to mention that she said the same thing to every class," added Luna, "She wants us to come and tell her if we hear anyone saying You-Know, Voldemort is back."

"Looking for spies and informants she is," said Colin contemptuously, "Does she think we're that stupid or something? I mean, we're teenagers, not five years old."

"That's obvious," snapped Harry, "Why else would Fudge want her here?"

"Harry," said Neville, "I know this might not be the best time, but you remember what I mentioned this morning? About a study group?" Harry nodded cautiously, "I think it's time we set one up for Defense at least. I think right now, we're the best in the year. But there has got to be others who'd like an OWL in that subject with what's coming."

"I'd say," Fred remarked, "we've got the beginnings of a good study group right here,"

"Even though we only got six OWLs between us," continued George,

"We both got OWLs in Defense," concluded Fred, "and all jokes aside; practical jokes draw heavily on Charms, Transfiguration and Herbology, not to mention a fair bit of basic potions."

"Let's get to it," agreed Harry as they dived in to their bags for their various homework assignments, "Snape's first," said Harry, "Get the worst done first and the rest doesn't look so bad."

The Twins made ready to leave, promising they would be back in about two hours, "Can't help with potions, and we've got our own... homework to do." It was Knuts to Galleons that the Twins were off to conduct product testing or market research. Like a pack of termites, they bored their way through the assignments, putting together the information for each and then writing up their own to avoid anyone accidentally copying each other. When the twins returned, there was just enough time for them to get a "course overview" of what Barty Crouch, posing as Alastor Moody had taught the OWLs students the previous year.

The following day was double Charms followed by double Transfiguration where both professors hammered on about the importance of the upcoming OWL exam and assigned a small mountain of homework. By the time they reached Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, the day had become cool and breezy, and as they walked down the sloping lawn, feeling the occasional drop of rain on their faces. Professor Grubbly-Plank stood waiting for the class some ten yards from Hagrid's front door, a long trestle table in front of her laden with twigs.

As Harry and Neville reached them, there was a loud shout of laughter. They both turned to find Draco Malfoy surrounded by his usual gang of Slytherin cronies. Harry stared for a moment at Ron, sniggering along with Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson and the rest continued to snigger heartily as they gathered around the trestle table.

"Everyone here?" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, once all the Slytherins and

Gryffindors had arrived. "Let's crack on then. Who can tell me what these are called?"

"Bowtruckles," said Neville, "They're tree-guardians, usually live in wand-trees." That explained how Neville knew about them. If it had something to do with a plant, he would know.

"Five points for Gryffindor," said Professor Grubbly-Plank. "Yes, these are

Bowtruckles, and they generally live in trees whose wood is of wand quality. Anybody know what they eat?"

"Woodlice," said Neville, "Or fairy eggs if they can get them."

"Take another five points. So, whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a Bowtruckle lodges, it is wise to have a gift of woodlice ready to distract or placate it. They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will try to gouge at human eyes with their fingers, which, as you can see, are very sharp and not at all desirable near the eyeballs. So if you'd like to gather closer, take a few woodlice and a Bowtruckle - I have enough here for one between three - you can study them more closely. I want a sketch

from each of you with all body-parts labeled by the end of the lesson."

Surprisingly, Malfoy did nothing to provoke Harry for the entire class, keeping himself and his cronies as far from Harry as possible and departing reasonably quickly at the end of class. With Herbology next on the agenda, they made their way to the nearest greenhouse, in time to catch a number of fourth-years spilling out including Ginny and Luna.

But before he could devote much more thought to the matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to him, "I want you to know," he said in a loud, carrying voice, "I personally believe you one hundred per cent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I."

"Thanks very much, Ernie," said Harry, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like this, but Harry was deeply appreciative of a vote of confidence from somebody outside his own circle. Now if only he could publically get out from under Dumbledore's shadow...

To nobody's surprise, Professor Sprout started their lesson by lecturing them about the importance of OWLs. Tired and smelling strongly of dragon dung, Professor Sprout's preferred type of fertilizer, the Gryffindors trooped back up to the castle an hour and a half later, none of them talking very much; it had been another long day.

The day was only going to get longer as Harry faced his first detention with Umbridge that afternoon at five o'clock. He didn't even bother dropping off his bag first as he made his way direct to the Great Hall to grab something to eat before facing whatever the toad had in store for him. He had barely reached the entrance of the Great Hall when a loud angry voice yelled for him, "Oi! Potter!"

"The fuck now?" he thought to himself as he turned to face Quidditch Captain Angelina Johnson, in the middle of towering temper, "What?" he asked.

"I'll tell you "what," she said, marching straight up to him and poking him hard in the chest with her finger, "How come you've landed yourself in detention for five o'clock on Friday?"

"Wha... Keeper tryouts," said Harry.

"Now you remember!" snarled Angelina, "Didn't I tell you I wanted to do a tryout with the whole team, and find someone who fits in with everyone! Didn't I tell you I'd booked the Quidditch pitch specially? And now you've decided you're not going to be there!"

He was tired, he was sore, he was irritated, and this was not helping any of it, "I didn't decide not to be there!" he growled. The sheer stupidity of the accusation set his blood boiling. "I get detention from Umbridge for telling the truth..."

"Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday," snapped Angelina, "I don't care how you do it! Tell her You-Know-Who's has not returned, is a figment of your imagination...." Neville silencing charm was too little too late.

Harry took a single step forward, and flexed his wrist. Angelina had built up a full head of steam and continued to rant, even though she was not making any sound until suddenly, she found her staring down the length of Harry's wand.

"Sonus," he said, restoring her ability to speak before returning his wand to its resting place, "Captain Angelina Johnson," he said coldly, hand shaking with barely suppressed rage, "of Gryffindor House," his voice was colder than the smoke off dry ice, chilling even. Ron could attest to that, as he watched the unfolding tableau with Draco, "You just crossed a line with me."

"I am not going to waste my time with the likes of you," he said, "You did not, and obviously do not believe that Voldemort has returned." He ignored the reflexive shudder at the name, "You obviously do not understand, how hard it would be, for me to fly, on that pitch, where I held my girlfriend after she died." His voice rose, not in volume, but in intensity and in anger, "But I see now, and see clearly, I'm the youngest house seeker in about a century. But I'm not a person to you. I'm just a thing. I'm just something to catch the Snitch."

He put his hand on his chest, fingered the clasp and removed the badge he had worn there for virtually every day he had been at Hogwarts. The badge was as stylized hand holding a golden snitch. It was what marked him as a member of the Quidditch team, as the Seeker, "The most important and most alone player in a team

game," he whispered to Angelina. He held it in his hand for a moment, "Fuck you," he said quietly, "Fuck Quidditch." The badge slapped the floor like a rifle shot. "And fuck your tryouts." He pushed past her and made his way to the Gryffindor table to get something to eat.

"Oh yeah," he added without turning, "This time, I'll let the insult slide. Next time, you pay for it."

At the appointed hour, he knocked on the door of the office located on the third floor, "Come in," a sugary voice answered. He entered cautiously, looking around the redecorated office. In his second year, it had been plastered with idiotic beaming portraits. In his third, it had housed some fascinating creature or other in a cage or tank. Last year, it had been packed cheek by jowl with instruments and artifacts related to detection of the dark arts.

This was a horrendous change from even Lockhart. Lacy covers and cloths covered virtually every surface, accompanied by vases full of dried flowers. The far wall was decorated with a Technicolor assortment of ornamental plates, each featuring a kitten with a bow wrapped around its neck. Taking his eyes off his surroundings, he eyed the toad like professor sitting behind the desk, "Good evening Mr. Potter."

He stood mute before her, not trusting himself to speak, "Well, sit down," she said pointing towards a small lace draped table beside a straight backed chair. He took his seat and studied the blank piece of parchment and its accompanying quill.

"Now then," she said smiling widely, "You will be writing lines for spreading evil, nasty attention seeking stories." Harry felt blood surge to his head and heard a thumping noise in his ears but maintained a level stare, "You are going to use a rather special quill of mine, and you will write, "I must not tell lies," until the message has sunk in.

She moved over to her desk, sat down and bent over a stack of parchment that

looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill, and then paused, "You have not given me any ink," he said.

"Oh, you won't need ink," her voice had the merest suggestion of a laugh, "you will find that you have more than enough ink to ensure that the message sinks in."

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper began to write. He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel - yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.

Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toad-like mouth stretched in a smile, "yes?"

"You think I'm going to give you the satisfaction do you?" he thought as he flexed his left hand, "Nothing." He said quietly. He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill on it once more, wrote "I must not tell lies," and felt the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again, the words had been cut into his skin; once again, they healed over seconds later.

He had gained a fair amount of control using wandless magic, but that was mostly in part due to the shards of his actual wand embedded in his flesh. The fragments served as both amplifiers and focusers, allowing him to channel magic without the apparent need for a wand.

He paused for a moment, casting a regeneration charm upon his hand and a numbing charm to block the pain. He knew she was watching him for any sign of weakness, of pain but he was not going to show either. "I've been tortured by Voldemort," he thought, "This doesn't even come close!"

Darkness fell outside Umbridge's window, "Come here," she said after two hundred and forty seven lines, "Hand." She instructed. He extended it and she took in her own. He repressed a shudder as she touched him with thick stubby ring encrusted fingers, "Doesn't seem to have made much of an impression, yet."

"Oh please," said Harry, suddenly, "You're just annoyed that it's not even chaffed the skin!" she stared at him, mouth open in surprise, "You forget Professor Umbridge," he said casually, "I have been

tortured by Voldemort, poisoned by a Basilisk, and the repeated victim of the Cruciatus Curse. Your little quill is a cute toy, and not much more!"

"My, my, mouthy aren't we?" said Umbridge with the same honey-sugar voice "We will just have to see how long your attitude lasts," she said smiling, "I did ensure that this particular blood quill works slowly, but perhaps it is not slow enough."

He left her office without another word, but with another week of detention. He returned to the residence, and unsealed the fireplace. A wave of his wand, he had a fire blazing, another wave of his wand and he was in disguise, "Gringotts London, Diagon Alley!"

Given the lateness of the hour, the bank was devoid of wizards but unsurprisingly, there were a number of other customers present including a number of vampires and even a few Werewolves. That brought him up short, but he joined the queue and waited his turn, "Blahgrast Diedom," he said, lifting the battery of glamour charms, "I apologize for the lateness of the hour, but this is a matter of urgency. I require an immediate meeting with Griphook and Marinashka Thaz-Dom."

Unbeknownst to Harry, standing instructions had been made regarding an unexpected appearance. He was directed to Griphook's office where both of them joined him fifteen minutes later, "Mr. Potter," said Griphook, "I presume this is not a social call?"

"I wish that it were merely that. Unfortunately, I find myself in need of expert advice, legal and otherwise," he said, "What do you know of Blood Quills?"

It was early morning when Harry returned to Hogwarts, just in time to miss his morning workout routine – for the first time in months – as he ascended for breakfast by himself. He had debated whether or not to push things this far, this fast. He had wanted to keep his emancipation out of the public record as long as possible and he had succeeded in doing that thus far. Now he might not have a choice in the matter.

"Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore, "might I speak to you for a moment?"

"Come from on high to mingle with the commoners," he mused, "Something I can help you with headmaster?" he helped himself to a stack of toast, scrambled eggs, sausages and bacon.

"Yes I received this from a mutual acquaintance, is this authentic?" Harry poured himself a cup of coffee and nodded. Conversation had stopped at this stretch of the Gryffindor table, as not even Harry's friends had a clue what was being discussed, "I see" he said mildly "We will have to address this with the Minister,"

"Not good enough headmaster," said Harry, "She goes, or I will share my memory of that detention with this school, the wizarding press, and everyone who graduated from Hogwarts!"

"Sadly, it is not that simple, Harry" Dumbledore replied, "She was appointed by the Minister. I did not hire, therefore I cannot fire.

Harry shrugged, "Not my problem. She goes," he met the headmaster's gaze for the first time, "Or I go."

This was something the headmaster was having a great deal of trouble processing, "Harry, you would... leave Hogwarts?"

"I've heard a lot of nice things about Beuaxbattons en France," he replied, "Mon Francais est pas tres bien mais les femme cette magnifique, une Veela aussi..." he shrugged and turned his attention back to his breakfast, "My French is terrible but I'd have great incentives to learn it. It should be easier than trying to teach myself the defense against the dark arts OWL."

Suddenly aware of virtually everyone trying to surreptitiously listen in on the conversation, Dumbledore hesitated about continuing the double speak, "Perhaps, we can adjourn to my office Mr. Potter, to continue our discussion in private?"

Standing, Harry took his coffee cup with him and let the headmaster lead the way back to the gargoyle, both of them maintaining a stony silence until they were ensconced in the office. Dumbledore was quick to realize that Harry had not threatened him directly, merely threatened to expose Delores Umbridge, "I realize that you have me over the proverbial barrel." Harry sat and waited as Dumbledore summoned a tea platter and some biscuits, "But have you considered the long range implications of your actions? You have

the power to make decisions, but you must also have the courage to accept the consequences of those decisions."

Harry shook his head politely at the offered beverage, and took a sip of his lukewarm coffee, "I have and frankly, you don't get caught in the fall out if whatever I'm up to does not go according to whatever I've planned."

"Har...Mr. Potter, have you considered the old saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend?" he asked. Harry nodded carefully, "While our methods and ways are completely different, we both want the same thing: The end of Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

"I can... agree to that much, but what's your point?" Harry asked, resisting the urge to take another sip of coffee. He should have refilled the cup before leaving the table.

"Have you heard of the other saying, "Better the devil you know, than the devil you don't?" asked Dumbledore. When Harry stayed silent, he continued, "We may be at odds, but at least we... know where we stand with one another. If I am removed as headmaster, Fudge will push hard to get Delores Umbridge in as Headmistress."

Harry stalled for time, taking a long, slow sip on the dregs of his morning coffee. He wouldn't admit it, but this was something that he had not considered at all, "Point," he replied, almost amicably, "But as I said, either she goes or I go."

"Beauxbatons?" said the headmaster lightly, "I take it that your... association with Fleur is going well?"

"That is none of your concern headmaster," snapped Harry, "I assume that you would like me to stay to fight this war for you? Kill and win it for you as well? Spare me the sanctimonious bullshit about victory for the Light," Dumbledore opened his mouth to protest.

"I have no interest in listening to anything you have to say off the topic of discussion about me and what I'm up to!" he snarled, "And don't feed me some crap about going dark! You have no right to talk!"

"Mr. Potter-"

"Hermione Jane Granger," Harry said, "is proof enough that you are going dark! And keep your hands where I can see them!" Harry had the headmaster silenced, "So I am hoping you've got a compromise in mind, otherwise I might just, like another old saying, "roll the dice and let the chips fall where they may.""

Less than an hour later, the two wizards had hammered out an arrangement that was in essence the compromise that leaves nobody happy, everyone irritated and partially satisfied. The presence was unexpected but welcome nonetheless, "Less than what Dumbledore wanted, Less than what you demanded, but the best compromises with an enemy tend to be of this nature."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend after all," thought Harry, "It is a pleasure to hear from you once again, Lady Hogwarts,"

"The pleasure is mine, Champion Potter," she replied, "But I believe it is time that we move beyond such formality."

"Um... do you have a first name?" asked Harry as he slowed his progress towards his first class of the day. Fortunately, he had a note from the headmaster to excuse his lateness and he planned to make a slight detour, casting an array of charms, he created a dead zone around him where none would intrude.

"Rowena," she replied, "like the founder of Ravenclaw. It was her idea, along with Salazar's to give me... life."

"Slytherin?" he asked suspiciously, "He... created you?"

"Not precisely, no," she replied, "If Rowena could be considered my mother, Salazar could be considered my father. Both of them gave time, magic, their memories and knowledge to create me, so that I could aid the worthy and protect the students of Hogwarts."

"Salazar.... Then you knew of the Chamber of Secrets!" he exclaimed.

"I did and do," she confirmed, "and I also know of Fifi's demise."

"Fifi? Who's... Fifi the Basilisk?" he asked, "What was she, a pet?"

"Yes. She was actually," confirmed Rowena, "Salazar created the chamber to be her home, and crafted the artifice to ensure she would be fed no matter what happened to him. She was charged to protect Hogwarts from all those who would wish to do... me and its occupants harm."

"And I killed one of the... your protectors?" he asked warily.

"You did," she confirmed. For an instant, Harry was convinced that he could feel her sad smile, "But you also freed her from Riddle's control, something that had driven her near insane for half a century. She was a magical creature, of intelligence but she had no choice but to obey the Heir of Slytherin, our father, such as it is."

"I never, even considered..." He could have talked to her, perhaps convinced her not to act as she had done, to stop, not to fight.

"You could have talked to her, but her will was bound to Salazar's and to his heir. She would have fought you to the death, yours or hers. Do not feel guilt over her death as she fell in battle to a worthy adversary."

"So, Rowena," he asked, "Where do we go from here?"

"I promised you my aid, and you shall have it," she said, "For now, there is little that I can do, but tell you this: Hogwarts a history is correct in that it is impossible to portkey or apparate through the wards of Hogwarts, it is possible to apparate within the castle." He could feel her hesitation, "The Chamber of Secret lies far enough beneath the Castle that it is actually not within the boundaries of the Castle Wards."

"I always did wonder why that Floo worked in the Chamber," he thought. With a start, he checked his Occulemency shields, worried for a moment that the secrets he carried had been compromised, but found his shields intact, as she brushed every so lightly against them, "Reading my thoughts Rowena?"

"No," she said easily, "Though your paranoia does you credit. To your friends, and allies, I open Hogwarts to them as a safe haven and sanctuary, should they ever require it."

"My thanks, Rowena," Harry honestly did not know what else he could say and said as much.

She laughed, "Get to class and soon! That note from the headmaster covers lateness, not absence!"

She departed and Harry glanced at his watch. Reaching in to his bag, he pulled a length of parchment and quill and wrote up an account of his most recent encounter with the headmaster, outlining in detail that events had not gone according to plan but that they had reached a compromise.

"... Umbridge is still here but her power to assign punishment has been limited to removing house points. She can't give detentions without the approval of the student's head of house and all of her detentions are to be monitored by another staff member. Her currently assigned detentions have also been revoked. It should keep her in line for the moment. But a more permanent solution will be required eventually. Memories are in the vials. You know what to do with them.

He called his elves to him and sent them on their way. Dobby apparated to Gringotts, while Winky deposited memories in the apartment within his trunk, secure within the Residence and its wards. "Hopefully," muttered Harry to himself, "The devil I know is better than the other devil I know." Harry set off to class.

That evening in London, Percy Weasley was sick and tired of dealing with Fudge and his incompetence. His career seemed to have come to a dead stop after an incredibly promising start. He knew he was intelligent, and knew that his career had stalled. He was convinced that he was underappreciated, first at the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and now as the Junior Minister to the Minister of Magic, he spent his days fetching and carrying for a minister who would have a hard time tying his own shoelaces if it were not for Umbridge and a few others who advised him. What frustrated Percy the most was that they were using the minister and he was in no position to take advantage of that!

Not only had his career stalled but also his family and he were as estranged as ever. He had no doubt that they would never even try to understand his position so long as Potter was around them! That teenage brat had put two of his brothers and baby sister in harms'

way! They had not even bothered to write or even try to stay in touch! Even Ron had sent him a birthday card! "With family like them, I don't need enemies," he thought savagely.

He unlocked his front door, pushing it open to find that he had guests, making themselves at home on his sofa and easy chair, drinking tea and snacking on his cookies. The trio eyed each other cautiously for a long moment before his old pet rat smiled at him, "Evening Percy," said Pettigrew, "Sorry to come in uninvited and unannounced, but you weren't home." Percy had achieved an "O" in both his Defense OWL and NEWT and had his wand in his hand, "I would ask you to have a seat, but we are in your home. So, my apologies for our unexpected presence."

That flummoxed him for a moment, but it was long enough for him to ask the obvious, "What are you two doing here?"

"Our Master, Lord Voldemort, wished for us to touch base, see if we could reach an agreement and some sort of understanding about the services that you can provide." Percy was surprised that it had taken this long for an approach, not that he was ready and willing to join the Dark Lord, but it was nice to know that somebody out there wanted him.

He hesitated, "What exactly do you want from me? Become a Death Eater?"

"Bluntly put, yes. But, not officially. Your position in the Minister's office can be of great value to us. Lord Voldemort has high expectations of what you can bring to our organization."

Percy lowered his wand, "So it would seem that you know a great deal about what happens at the ministry."

"We know everything that is worth knowing, and a lot that is not worth knowing," said Peter, almost amicably, "I am here to offer you a place at the table on the winning side. Loyalty and hard work can see you rise to the ranks of the Inner Circle, once you have proven yourself worthy. And I'm confident you will measure up."

"What makes you so sure you're going to win?" challenged Percy.

"Because we know what we're doing, and we have our Master, the greatest mind and leader our world has ever known, versus a fool of a Minister, a senile headmaster...and yes, an admittedly powerful sixteen year old." Percy took that in for a minute. Peter and the rest had clear orders: Get Percy's agreement to join him....or kill him. Pettigrew hoped that Percy was smart enough to realize this.

"What happens if I say no?"

"You really need to ask?" For the first time, Peter drew his wand, and twirled it between his fingers. "Face it Percy. If you were going to say no, you would have said so by now. The ministry does not understand or appreciate you. We know your family does not understand or appreciate you. But Lord Voldemort knows. He understands. All you have to do is say you are with us."

"What happens, if I do?"

Peter smiled. If there was one thing the Death Eaters needed, it was more members "Are you saying yes?"

Percy Weasely nodded firmly, "Yes."

"Good. We'll be in touch in a few days with your first assignment," said Peter with a smile, "In a few months time your brothers and sister will be begging you for forgiveness." Percy smiled, that was a good image. The Death Eaters apparated away and left Percy alone with his dreams of money, power, and prestige, seated at the right hand of You-know... Lord Voldemort. He smiled.

Chapter 35

Inquisitive Inquisitors

"So you're out of detention," said Ginny, "and managed to get Dumbledore to put a leash on Umbridge. I have to ask, exactly what did you do to get those concessions?" The morning had passed quickly and painlessly, except for even more homework piled on – not that it mattered too much since they had already worked through most of the previous day's assignments – except Trelawney's dream diary.

"Let's just say that he talked a lot of shit, and I pretended to listen," said Harry with a smirk, as he made a start on his steak and kidney pie, "He's finally decided to talk to me, and all he wants to talk about is how he's worried I'm going Dark." That caused everyone to stop eating as Harry drained his fifth cup of coffee of the day, "Tell you what, after dinner tonight lets meet and I'll show you the entire conversation. Then you can judge for yourselves."

Classes went smoothly, but Harry's somewhat private showdown with Angelina had made its way around the House and the reactions of his housemates varied. Some were full of condemnation for him quitting the Quidditch team, but most were indifferent. He only hoped sentiment would stay indifferent. He did not need a fourth front to fight a war on.

Things were also ready at The Quibbler. The newspaper had put out a special edition, announcing the resumption of its exclusivity contract with Harry Potter for the next three years but had not mentioned any of his friends just yet. There would be no need to bring up their contracts, which were for media protection above all else.

That evening, as promised, Harry took full advantage of their trunks, gathering them together, including Fleur to watch an episode of "the Dumbledore saga," a title sardonically applied by Harry to what he was sure was going to be the first of many such time wasting, pointless conversations. Dropping the silver thread in to the Pensieve, Harry found himself wishing for popcorn, when Winky popped in, "Harry, I is trying something new in the kitchen, and is hoping you will enjoy." She dropped the bowl on the table and departed.

With a total of seven trunks and the residence between the pair of house elves, there simply was not that much work for the pair. Harry had made sure that his elves, though essentially bonded servants, he treated them as friends, family even and the pair of elves still had time to help in the kitchens or do some general cleaning around Hogwarts. Otherwise, their duties were somewhat limited to carrying messages or some limited reconnaissance work on the numerous death eaters in training. Winky had discovered a curious passion for cooking and had taken to experimenting, and had thus far blown up the kitchen on several different occasions but her creations more than made up for it.

The popcorn was yet another original Winky creation. One taste and he knew that it was greasy, calorie loaded and ever so addicting. He passed the bowl around and it was empty in a flash, "This is going to go straight to my thighs," said Fleur with a shudder, "and I know this, and yet, I want more!"

"Winky!" called Harry, "More popcorn please!"

The pair of elves deposited a number of heaped bowls on the table and apparated out yet again. Munching on their post dinner snack, it did not take long for the Goblin contingent or for Blake and Remus to arrive for the viewing. It also meant a few more bowls of popcorn had to be provided. Surrounded by his friends and allies, Harry just took a moment to savor that... feeling, "Here we go folks, the first episode in the Dumbledore Soap Opera Saga." It lasted a little over fifteen minutes and when it was done, reactions ranged from amusement to disbelief, anger and annoyance.

"So let me get this straight." said Remus, "Dumbledore thinks you're going Dark, because you have recruited your friends in to a private army, subverted members of the Order of the Phoenix, and used magic to defend yourself and your whale like cousin," he ticked off the third point with his fingers, "Did I miss anything?"

"You did. While he was conducting his audio inquisition he was very inquisitive and kept trying to poke his way in to my mind, very eager to find out just what I was up to, or just out of habit." Harry took a sip of his coffee, decaffeinated considering the hour, "He knows what I can do, Occulemency wise, but I made like nothing was going on," said Harry grimly, "Next time, I'm going to give him a world of hurt."

The discussion went around the table and they all agreed that it was a matter of time before Dumbledore began hauling them in for a fireside chat and a mind probe. Harry privately agreed with that assessment, "I don't have to like him, to work with him," he shrugged, ""Better the devil you know, than the devil you don't" was what he said to me, and frankly, I agree with him. I'm better off working with him than trying to get around Umbridge, especially if she winds up as Headmistress."

"But why not just reveal what she has done?" asked Ginny, "That would get her out of Hogwarts... out of the Ministry even."

"Harry, do you think she knows about the residence?" said Fleur suddenly, "It was common knowledge last year and it will only be a matter of time before she tries... something."

Harry shrugged, "Say what you want about our resident manipulative headmaster, but he's right. It's better than she be where we can take discreet action to contain her, rather than out there causing god knows what kind of grief. Besides she's a problem for another time." said Harry, "For the moment, we have other things to discuss. Blake, Remus, how go preparations?"

"About six weeks till everything is ready," replied Blake, "It's mostly small details now, what with the wards and defenses in place and most of the heavy lifting completed. Security is up and running, supplies are coming in, but its taking a long time to get some of it, hence... six weeks at least, no more than eight." He gave Griphook a small nod, "Without our friend's help here, the basement would have taken a long time to ward."

"Geomancy," said Griphook, "it is something Goblin's do very well." There was a measure of pride in that statement and no wonder. Non-Goblin Geomancers are rare and nowhere as skilled as the Goblins were. Then the Goblins had built their entire civilization underground making mastery of earth and stone a necessity.

"Have you been able to make an agreement with the Centaurs?" asked Harry.

The Goblin pair shook their heads, "They do not wish to partake in a war of men, I doubt that anyone from either side can sway them for the moment."

"Remus, your overtures to the werewolves?" asked Harry,

"I've managed to get a number of them lined up for questioning under Veritaserum," said Remus, "I think it's a good idea to get as many of them on our side as possible now. Free Wolfsbane has incredible attraction and appeal."

"Griphook, I presume that the Goblins are ready?"

Griphook hesitated, "I have my Clan, and kin ready to fight for you, but the Nation as a whole is refusing to ally themselves with any wizard, despite the events of the First War. It is, a work in progress, but I believe a number of the lesser Clans will side with you, in exchange for gold."

Harry put his hand on the Goblin's shoulder, "Griphook, all of you here should remember this. You do not fight for me. You fight with me," said Harry, "It's not about semantics. It is about loyalty and honor. We stand together, or we die alone..."

Conversation meandered over a number of topics and it was quickly becoming clear to the six teenagers, three adults and two Goblins that Harry was creating an army of his own, to rival that of the Death Eaters and whatever other things walked, crawled or slithered out of the darkness. "Or, strides out wearing the Dark Mark with a cloak around its shoulders," he thought darkly. Less than an hour later however, there was only one final point on the agenda, with a nod to Fleur, "Griphook, I want the Residence and the bathroom in the castle placed under Fidelius. "

The Goblin nodded thoughtfully, "A single charm or two separate ones?" Harry opted for two, citing that "an added layer of protection" would not remiss given the political climate within the castle. "It will take time to prepare for the charms, end of the week?" Harry nodded, "If there is nothing else, Harry, I should be going, as Gringotts himself had a saying, "Whether night or day there is a golden profit to be made."" He left via the fireplace Floo, leaving Harry and Fleur alone, for the first time in a few days.

It was awkward for a few moments between them, as they had never truly clarified where they stood, as friends, as a couple, as anything. Just because everyone thought that, the two were a couple made things easier for everyone else. The night would be a long, but quiet one, Fleur saying she had parchment work, Harry citing homework. However, Fleur had one concern she had to raise, "Fred and George were telling me that you have resigned from the Quidditch team T'es sérieux?"

He shrugged, "I've got a madman with an army out to kill me, a headmaster trying to use me, and the wizarding public convinced I'm the madman, and I'm trying to build allies, and raise an army from the malcontent public to fight the real madman." Harry was more than a little bitter at the task before him, all because he had survived a curse as an infant. The prophecy from the Goblins was only coming true, because he had survived the killing curse. That was something he kept to himself for the moment, not sure what the last two lines of it, really meant, "The last thing I need is something as ridiculous as Quidditch."

"You once told me that you need to look dark and brooding," she said, "not like cute Quidditch player just off the pitch. You were serious weren't you?"

"I was actually joking." he hesitated, "What did Fred or George say to you about me leaving the Gryffindor team?" she was contemplating the right answer to that question, "I'm guessing that both of them told you about Angelina and me having it out and then my rather... direct resignation?" she nodded, "That's... about the size of it." he confirmed. The rest of their evening passed in relative silence, apart from the occasional conversation, but the silence was comfortable enough. It was almost midnight when Harry excused himself, "need to keep up appearances," was his explanation.

A different set of conversations had taken place in the Slytherin common room, where Ronald Weasley was busy spilling his guts on everything he had on Sirius Black, including how Hermione and Harry had been the ones to rescue him while he lay unconscious in the hospital wing. Though he had contemplated sharing this during the summer via owl, it had occurred to him that it was very possible that Dumbledore was having his mail monitored. The information went from Ron to Draco and then on to Lucius Malfoy, who wondered just what to do with it.

Malfoy had received a copy of the solicitors' letter informing him of the exclusivity agreement between Potter and the Quibbler. Moreover, given that it came from the former friend of Potter, its greatest use would have been as propaganda material. The exclusivity contract had tied the hands of the Prophet. However, Dumbledore was not part of an exclusivity contract, and his role in events that made Sirius Black's escape possible. In his private study within the depths of Malfoy Manor, Lucius set about composing a letter to the managing editor of the Daily Prophet.

Harry on the other hand was, to his delight, discovering that the Lady had indeed meant what she said, as he apparated between two spots in the bathroom. Apparition lessons with the Goblins had been something of a crash course workout but he had to admit it was very useful. He apparated in to the library amongst the rarely visited and used reference section, and began casting a number of spells and charms, creating an impenetrable dead zone that no one would notice between two bookshelves. Saying goodnight to the Head Librarian Madame Pince, he walked out and apparated back to the Residence. With him being the early riser, someone would spot him on his morning workout. This established where he was at night, and it would take a little doing to make this a regular pattern so he would be able to account for any random disappearances.

Fleur decided enough, was enough, "You've done enough studying for one evening." She grabbed him by the front of his robes and pulled him in to a kiss that lasted for several long moments. "I've done enough parchment work!" she kissed him again and dragged him in to the training rooms of the residence where she seemed to just glide out of his grasp as she held her wand, "Something a little more physical?"

Harry grinned, as his wand appeared in his hand, "What do I get if I win?" he asked.

She grinned, "Anything you want!" A split second later, the first curse leapt from her wand towards him. He had a shield up and was already moving before the curse rebounded. It was going to be one of those nights.

In another part of the castle, Ron was reading a letter from his older brother Percy for the fifth time. He laughed, more than slightly

amused at the counsel in contained "away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions." Whatever, did his brother mean? "Look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow; you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing."

His brother's advice about avoiding "being tarred with the same brush as Potter" was very irrelevant, as those ties had been severed long before. It did not take long for Ron to put the pieces together, what with Percy singing praise of Umbridge, the hints of "Dumbledore's regime" soon being over. He folded the letter and shrugged. Being Head Boy in a few years definitely did have appeal; he wondered whether he could gather a group of like-minded students, to be prefects, perhaps his prefects...

Breakfast the following morning was accompanied by gasps of shock, disbelief and more than one student had swallowed in fear and terror. The front page of the Prophet bore a large photograph of Dolores Umbridge smiling widely and blinking slowly from beneath the headline "Ministry Seeks Educational Reform" accompanied by the tagline "Dolores Umbridge Appointed First Ever High Inquisitor."

"High Inquisitor?" Said Harry darkly, his half-eaten piece of toast slipping from his fingers. "What does that mean?" the article held all the details. Details which left Harry snorting in to his coffee when he read about her being an "immediate success" that was "totally revolutionizing the teaching Defense against the Dark Arts." However, there were a few comments that he found himself actually agreeing with – the falling standards being one of them: History, Defense and Divination were three prime examples. He was not too sure what to make of the teaching inspections. Those, he had no doubt, were bound to get very interesting...

Umbridge was not in the mornings Double History or Double Potions lessons much to everyone's disappointment. Harry growled under his breath when he got his potions homework back on Moonstones with a large "D" in the top right corner. He shrugged and slammed the essay in to his bag. The lesson went smoother, as he read and reread every line of instruction to create a modest Strengthening Solution that he delivered to Snape's desk before heading to the Great Hall for lunch.

"So how do the grades work for the OWLs?" asked Harry as he added salt and a touch of pepper to his bowl of soup before passing it to the twins.

"Well," said Fred, "Start at the top with "O" for "Outstanding," and then there's "E" for "Exceeded Expectations, and I've always thought Fred and I should've gotten "E" in everything because we exceeded expectations just by turning up for class...never mind turning up for exams," added George as an afterthought.

They laughed for a few moments, "So After "O" and "E" comes "A" for "Acceptable," said Neville, "The last passing grade right?"

"Yep," said Fred, dunking an entire roll in his soup before transferring it in to his mouth and swallowing it, rather python like.

"After that, it's all fail grades?" asked Harry.

"Yeah, "P" for "Poor" which means you just failed by a couple of points," continued Fred, "Then "D" for "Dreadful."

"Or Dunce, depending on who you ask," added Neville.

"Thought it stood for "Draco," said Harry with a dark smile as he took a sip of his coffee.

"And finally, "T," said George.

""T?" What the heck is that?" asked Neville, "Something lower than "D"?"

"Troll," said Fred as everyone burst out laughing again. Though Harry confirmed it with a sidelong glance at Neville, that neither of them were sure if the twins were just pulling their legs or serious. "Any of you had an inspected lesson?" Fred asked.

"Didn't see her in History or Potions this morning," said Harry as he helped himself to a small portion of salad, "Any of you?"

"Charms," said George, "Just before lunch. Wasn't bad... All she did was sit in a corner and take lots of notes, asked a few students for the opinion on the classes. But its Flitwick," he shrugged, "He gets everyone through OWLs and NEWTs alright."

"Who've you got this afternoon?"

Divination and it was, to Harry surprise, an inspected lesson as Umbridge poked her head up through the trap door at the last minute before class could start. Everyone who had been talking quietly fell silent almost instantly, "Good afternoon, Professor Trelawney," said Professor Umbridge with her wide smile, "You received my note, I trust? Giving the time and date of your inspection?"

The odd number of students in the class this time worked to Harry's advantage as it gave him free reign to pretend to read passages from the textbook while listening in on the conversation. At least he tried to listen in on what the two professors were saying. They were at the next table and Umbridge was making yet another note upon her clipboard and Professor Trelawney was beginning to get extremely aggravated, "Now," said Umbridge, looking up at Trelawney, "You've been in this post how long, exactly?"

After a slight pause in which she seemed to decide that the question was not so offensive that she could reasonably ignore it, she said in a deeply resentful tone, "Nearly sixteen years."

"Quite a period," said Professor Umbridge, making a note on her clipboard. "So it was Professor Dumbledore who appointed you?"

"That's right," said Professor Trelawney shortly. The cloying incense seemed to recede, as Trelawney grew somewhat agitated, if not irritated with this particular line of questioning.

Professor Umbridge made another note, "And you are a great□great□granddaughter of the celebrated Seer Cassandra Trelawney?"

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, holding her head a little higher as another note was made on the clipboard.

"But I believe – correct me if I am mistaken – that you are the first in your family since Cassandra to possess the Inner Eye or Second Sight?"

"These things can skip generations, three, seven even twenty generations," she replied as Umbridge's toad like smile widened as she made yet another note.

"Perhaps you could predict something for me?"

"The Inner Eye does not function upon command," she said, clutching convulsively at the shawl around her scrawny neck, "And with so many students the ether is muddled at present. Perhaps if you return this evening? I cannot make an accurate prediction without first studying you."

"Studying me?" said Professor Umbridge incredulously, "Whatever do you mean?"

"Your star sign, the lines of your hands, your date of birth, as a starting point," She replied almost whimsically, "This evening then?" Umbridge gave a tight nod and Harry chuckled at the way Trelawney had actually put the bitchy toad on the defensive, "But already, I sense something, some danger about you or to you, a... weapon... hooves..." she almost whispered the last, "What time can I expect you?"

Umbridge left the class shortly thereafter, and Harry gave Professor Trelawney a slight smile and nod, which was returned in kind by the Divination Professor. The subject was still 70% bullshit, 20% nonsense and 10% rubbish, but that was the subject, not the professor who taught the subject and managed to make it remotely interesting, so it wasn't all that bad, "You have to respect that," mused Harry, "Just wish I didn't die in every class."

Defense that afternoon was more of the same: verbatim reading from the book. Harry actually found himself dozing off, and fighting to stay awake, much like the rest of the class was and when the bell rang, he paused to remove the alertness charm he'd cast wandless on himself. And almost regretted it, "Should have kept that on till I got some coffee in me," he thought making his way to the Great Hall. Hedwig was waiting for him, delivering a message from Griphook. He hesitated, but realized that the crowds of students would notice him talking to specific people and possibly draw attention from the staff table.

Carefully, he extended his Legilimency outwards, search through the ocean of voices and thoughts until he located the six he was seeking. His touch was as feather light as he could make it but they still visibly startled when he knocked upon their Occulemency shields and passed the message: Residence out of bounds until Friday. They acknowledged his request for privacy and he breathed a sigh of relief. Communicating through Legilimency was something new to all of them but they were getting a decent grasp upon making it work within line of sight. Satisfied, he retreated to the residence and took the Floo to his manor, where Fleur was waiting for him, "Miss me that much?" she teased him, "You saw me only yesterday."

He chuckled, pulled her in to a hug, and let the smell of honey and apples with the freshness of a spring rain engulfed his senses as he simply held the witch in his arms, and let the fragrance wash over him, "Still not comfortable... with other people around... you know?"

That much, was true, thought Fleur. Upon reflection, hand holding, a few chaste kisses were all she could get out of him in public. When they were alone, he was more... demonstrative, more physically affectionate. She recalled their duel the previous night. It had started with spells and wands and very quickly become something else entirely. However, there were still limits, and Fleur could understand them and had not pushed, but that's not to say that it was not... frustrating for her, giving that her other half was screaming to tear his clothes off and... She dragged her mind out of the gutter and back to the moment, "So tell me, did you come to play or play?" She asked.

Her laughter was a light, happy sound, one that he never got tired of hearing, "I hope that Dobby remembered to turn on the heating for the pool!"

"Dobby did," replied the house elf as he stared at the couple and hid a smile by studiously studying his reflection in the shine of his uniform's boots. It was a good image as far as he was concerned: Harry stepping over the threshold of the foyer, in to the manor proper with Fleur in his arms, laughing all the while, "Dobby also has chocolate cake and whipped cream under a warming charm in case Harry and Ms. Delacour get hungry."

"I really should give that elf a raise," said Harry as he carried Fleur out to the pool.

"Harry James Potter!" she warned, "Don't you...."

He dived in the moment she hit the water with a shriek.

Chapter 36

Inspections and Education

Transfiguration the following morning was one lesson everyone would enjoy, and he was right: Umbridge lurked in the corner with her clipboard and quill making notes and was promptly put in her place the first time she cleared her throat with that "hem – hem" cough of hers. Admittedly, Harry had done little to help matters and smooth the way as he cast a number of subtle charms at the toad that caused her to alternate between itching, laughing and hiccupping through the first half of the double lesson. It was no surprise when Professor McGonagall finally threw the woman out of her classroom to seek aid in the hospital wing. (LOL)

Harry flexed his left hand, "mischief managed," he muttered to Neville who barely managed to conceal his laughter. It became even more so when Umbridge reentered the room, and within minutes, seemed to be suffering from the trio of maladies all over again which prevented Umbridge from following Professor McGonagall around the class. In all fairness, it is unlikely that the Scottish Professor would have tolerated such a shadow.

Umbridge took a different tack in Care for Magical Creatures and wandered amongst the students, questioning them on magical creatures. Most people were able to answer well and Harry's spirits lifted somewhat; at least the class was not letting Hagrid down. Then questions about injuries sustained by the students arose. When Goyle gave a stupid grin, Crabbe and Ron were suddenly distracted by something and Malfoy hastened to answer the question, Harry and Neville both knew that Hagrid was in trouble. The end result was that Hagrid's past, involving Norbert, and Buckbeak took center stage and Umbridge's discomfort extend to include three Slytherins and a Gryffindor.

That evening, under the watchful eye of Griphook with his friends looking on, Harry cast the first of two Fidelius charms, securing the Residence, binding the secret within himself, before doing the same to the bank of sinks that house the staircase down to the Residence. It was not as if Harry wanted to kick Moaning Myrtle out of her home. More importantly, too many people knew about the bathroom so when it went missing, questions would have been asked. As the

twins had jointly put it, "People are dumb enough, but one smart person, would defeat the purpose of this."

Homework complete, they were lounging around with their drink of choice when Ginny finally snapped out what they were all thinking, but unwilling to admit, "She's useless as a teacher and we aren't learning anything about Defense from her."

"And you propose what?" asked Neville, "we've already got a study group of our own and I think we'll do alright..."

"There's got to be more than just us six that want a passing grade or an OWL Nev!" she said, exasperated. Whether she was more exasperated with him, or the teaching was up for debate at that moment.

"While I agree with my dear sister..." began Fred,

"... it is a touch too late as she has the job..." continued George.

"...and Fudge will do everything in his power to make absolutely sure she keeps the job," concluded Fred.

"Perhaps the time has come," said Luna.

"Come for what?" asked Colin.

"Time for us to start preparing ourselves for what is out there, for what Harry has been saying for months is coming: War." She turned her gaze on Harry, "We can learn the jinxes, spells and curses out of books but most of us are beyond that, and most of us are also trained in various other things as well."

True enough, considering that all of them were decent Occulumens, Colin and Fred were also proficient at Legilimency and Ginny was developing an affinity with not only Geomancy but also wandless casting. "You're saying we need to hire our own professor?" asked Harry.

"While you could afford one, that won't work, not if we intend to get more of the students involved," she said clearly, almost hesitant, "They will listen best so someone they know. Someone who has fought... Voldemort and lives to tell about it."

"Who, then?" said Harry, frowning at her.

She frowned, wondering if Harry was having her on, "Isn't it obvious?" she said. "I'm talking about you, Harry."

"About me what?" said Harry.

"I'm talking about you teaching us Defense against the Dark Arts."

Harry stared at her. Then he turned to the others and found them actually giving what she was saying serious consideration. Harry grinned convinced this was a joke, "I appreciate the vote of overconfidence but I'm no teacher..."

"I'm the best in my year," said Colin quietly, "I know you're the best in yours."

"After the tournament," Ginny hesitated, "there is no doubt about that."

"Me?" said Harry

"Think on what you have done," said Luna quietly,

"What?"

"You know, for someone of such skill and power," mused Fred.

"Quite right," agreed George, "he can be a bit dense at times."

"Hermione, told me about the Philosopher's Stone," said Ginny, "your first year. I don't think I need to say anything about your second year do I?"

"Sent a hundred Dementors running in your third year," said Colin, "your patronus is a minor legend around the castle."

"And last year...well..."

"Listen to me!" said Harry angrily, "Just listen to me, all right? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck! I had barely half a plan on everything! I just did whatever I could think

of, and I nearly always had help □" there was a crackle of static and everyone tensed, ever so slightly, as eldritch energy began to build between Harry's finger tips, "I'm not a teacher! I got through all that because help came at the right moment, or I got lucky with a guess. I was blundering around and didn't have a single clue what the fuck I was about."

"Winky!" The house elf appeared with a pop, and took in the scene: Harry with sparks leaping between his fingertips, everyone else pressed backwards, trying to put as much distance between him and them as possible, she looked to Neville who had summoned her, nodded and vanished. Harry never even noticed, "I may have shown you what took place but you don't know! You can't know! None of you have ever had to face him! Memorize spells and cast? Are you fucking kidding me?" roared Harry.

The twins had surreptitiously casted a number of shields over the group and Colin was ready to let fly with a stunning spell if necessary, even if he knew it was not going to do more than unleash a firestorm, "...Diggory was stupid and he messed up! It could have just as easily been me! Fuck! It would have been me if Voldemort had no need of me!" He raved for another minute at least, hands gripping the back of his chair until the knuckles were bone white. He still trembled with rage, and there was smoke rising from the chair.

"Harry," the voice was like a soft ray of sunshine, "Nobody said anything about Cedric, or Hermione," her voice was even, gentle, but firm, "This is exactly why they need you. They are trained, but they have no idea what a real duel involves. They don't know what it is like to face down Death Eaters, never mind Voldemort."

She was standing next to him, and gently placed a hand on his shoulder, "They are right. They need you. More than that, your friends, your housemates need you. None of us can... they can only ask you to do something. They cannot make you do anything."

Harry could not think of anything to say. He was feeling slightly ashamed of his outburst, of laying it out for all of them, so plainly, so blunt and direct. His words, together with the memory of that night from the previous year, had made it all jarringly clear: This was not a game.

For the first time, he turned to look at her, "What do you think I should do?"

"Are you asking for my advice? Or for my opinion?" she said, gently massaging his shoulders and the base of his neck. Gradually he began to relax, and it was not long before he was slumped over the chair, "Or for what I honestly think?"

He looked up at her and smiled weakly, "All three?"

Fleur laughed and the tension broke in that moment, "My advice is that you should think about it, consider what they are asking you to do. My opinion is that they need a proper teacher and that you are the best available for it." Expertly she rolled his shoulder and the joint gave a resounding crack, "Honestly, they were right to ask you. But it is up to you to decide. Sleep on it; make a decision in a few days. It is still early enough in the school year."

"How did you get here?" he asked suddenly.

"Winky," she replied, "she found me in the manor, said you were on the verge of losing your temper."

"I'm gonna have to give that elf a raise too," he said.

Fortunately, the rest of the night passed without incident as one by one, different people said good night. It was unspoken, but everyone began gravitating towards the different bedrooms of the residence. Those who had lived there, the year before returned to their old rooms. New arrivals - specifically the Prank Masters and Mistress - Gred, Forge and Ginny found rooms that suited their liking. Fleur had not said anything, but none of them needed it spelt out for them: Fleur was not leaving him alone. It turned out to be a good thing: Dreams, of unknown origin troubled his sleep for the first time.

It felt like he was back in the maze, back in the third task of the Triwizard Tournament. Instead of hedges, however there were long corridors and locked doors no matter which way he turned. Floors, walls and ceiling, all made of the same dark stone. There was no telling which way he was supposed to turn to find an exit. He did recognize one key detail however: The doors looked exactly like those at the ministry when he was there for his disciplinary hearing that summer.

He woke up with a start, covered in sweat, his scar prickling uncomfortably, and he knew instantly that was less than a good sign. "Harry?"

"I'm ok," he said quietly, "Sorry... didn't mean to wake you," He waved his hand with a sigh and began thawing out the iced over section of wall.

"Nightmare?" she asked. He shook his head, as he ended the spell, and vanished the puddle of water before it spread across the floor. He shook his head, "You going back to sleep?" she asked, "Or are you too awake to sleep?"

He stretched, almost cat like, "Too early to be awake," he half mumbled as he lay down and started to pull the blanket over himself when to his surprise, the blanket simply refused to move, "What the..." he turned over to face Fleur. The only light was a soft nightlight glowing in the far corner of the room, barely enough to throw faint half shadows across everything.

He mumbled a spell and a small globe of light rose from his hand, providing just enough light to illuminate Fleur, eyes closed and "asleep." Harry studied her for a long moment and leaned over, "Sticking charms don't mean you get to hog the entire blanket," he whispered in to her ear, "now release my half of it," she cracked the hint of a smile, "or suffer the consequences."

She snored, she actually snored at him in response, "Very well then," said Harry, and he cancelled the sticking charm with a "finite incantatem," and lifted the blanket with a simple first year charm before showering the "sleeping witch" with a spray of snow from his wand.

Fleur was immediately shattered out of her pretended slumber with a loud, "Eep!" as she rolled out of bed and landed on the floor with a thud that had one Harry Potter sniggering uncontrollably as she cursed in French until she finally managed to untangle herself from the blanket.

"Harry. James. Potter." She towered over him, wand in hand, and Harry stopped laughing as he stared at her. The snow had melted, and soaked the silk chemise, making it cling to every single alluring

curve of her body, "You, are about to pay," she raised her wand," for this transgression!" the fountain of cold water drenched Harry from head to toe, leaving him spluttering as he rose to his knees and tackled Fleur to the floor.

"You're not ticklish are you?" her eyes widened ever so slightly as her wand rolled out of reach. Her struggles to get free were the only encouragement Harry needed to turn a poke in the ribs in to an all out assault as laughter escaped Fleur.

Several minutes later, he released the breathless Veela both of them lying on the floor of the room, "See?" he said with a smile as he ran one hand down the side of her face, slowly, almost lovingly, "You could have saved yourself so much laughter if you'd just given me my half of the blanket back." He looked at her intently, and she saw it, before she felt it. That, flash of something... a mix of longing and desire? Or where her Veela senses wrong? Or, she reminded herself, she was getting overly optimistic.

Their faces were inches apart, him pinning her to the floor, and she had one leg hooked around his knee, just holding him in place. Water dripped from his hair, each drop like a pinprick of desire, from him to her. She looked up at him, staring in to those dark green emerald eyes. Yes, it was there. Clear as day for anyone to see, if they could see the emotional war going on with him. She stretched her arms over her head, arching her back, pressing her body against his, making it clear, that he could have her, if he wanted. "What am I going to do Fleur?" he whispered huskily.

She almost did it. She almost used her Veela traits. His guard was down and he could be made to take her. She berated herself for not doing so as he sat up. Intimacy, with another still scared him. On the other hand, perhaps it had scarred him. She could not be sure which it was. He was not too sure either. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Can't sleep," he grunted. True enough. He had not needed Legilimency to know the choice she had just made. He let his guard down around her. He trusted her. Moreover, she had done nothing to prove herself unworthy of such trust. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just after five in the morning. He figured he had lost less than half an hour of sleep, "might as well get up. You need anything?"

She almost said yes, but shook her head, "No," she was standing wand in hand as everything began to dry. She wanted nothing at that moment because it was aggravating and frustratingly clear that he still could not give her what she needed. For the moment however, she was prepared to wait.

Life went on, about as normally as could be expected: Harry was having no difficulty in any of his classes except Potions where Snape continued to make his life hell, followed by Divinations, where he got along better with professor Trelawney, without really getting a better grasp of the subject matter. Harry absent-mindedly kept an eye on the Quidditch team and its practices. Ron had somehow made the house team, and Harry had bitten his lips, tongue and then the inside of his cheek to keep from commenting on that!

Considering that, Angelina had gone from yelling - according to the Twins and the new Seeker Ginny - doing "an excellent impersonation of mum in "Argentinean Silverback mode"" on Ron after almost every practice. It made Harry wonder and he did his own investigation, wondering who really the better Keeper was. It turned out that Vicky Frobisher and Geoffrey Hooper both surpassed Ron by a fair margin, with Hooper possibly making a better Chaser than Keeper. All of it left Harry wondering what kind of magic had earned Ron a place on the team. Harry shook his head as he watched the team's last practice at the end of September and came to the only one possible conclusion: Gryffindor would not be winning the Quidditch Cup OR the House Cup this year.

He considered and cornered Ginny one night in the Common Room, "Gin," he almost laughed at the way her eyes bugged out when he handed her the Firebolt, "No sense in letting it gather dust. Go out there and kick some ass." Nights passed and none were the wiser that Harry rarely spent the night in the castle by using the Floo in the residence to go back and forth between Hogwarts and his manor to spend nights with Fleur when she could not make it to the residence.

A few nights later, they were once again gathered, working through their homework and Harry actually snickered as he realized things were a lot easier without having a semi-demented Quidditch Captain hanging over his shoulder. Harry had just put the last full stop on a two-foot long essay about anti-venoms when Ginny asked him, "Have you given our... idea any thought?"

Harry did not answer at once, considering everything that he did think about the idea: It was either as insane as it sounded the first night he had heard it and yet he had been thinking about his encounters, the spells and found himself subconsciously planning lessons. "Yeah," I've given some thought."

"And?" prodded Colin.

"You all do remember what I said about it being luck, more than skill right?"

"Don't bother pretending you aren't the best at Defense," chided Neville gently. We know. We've seen what you can do. All of us are trained in some of the things you can do. All the skills and knowledge we have, it's because of you." He held up a hand to forestall the protest, "Yes the teaching wasn't done by you. Marinasha, Heartfang, Shekhailos, and all the Goblins taught us. But you were there to coach, poke, answer questions and prod us when we needed it. You can teach defense, dueling, the basics of combat strategy and dueling tactics."

Harry looked round at his gathered friends, "You all want me to teach you?"

"Well... I think," said Luna, "you should teach anyone who wants to learn. This is about defense against a real enemy, in the real world. We should not keep this opportunity from others. All should be able to defend themselves."

Harry considered this for a moment, then said, "Yeah, but I doubt anyone would give a damn what I say or think. I'm a lunatic who needs a course of shock therapy at St. Mungos."

"It would surprise you how many people are interested in what you have to say," said Luna, "I just wish you'd reconsider about the article for The Quibbler. People are getting tired of reading the rehash of last year's stories."

Harry shrugged, "What do you want me to do Luna? You saw that night. The Wizengamot saw that night. They don't believe the truth, even when it's rammed down their collective throat." There was no

arguing with that, "And I don't feel all that... comfortable talking about it."

"Tell you what," said Fred, changing the subject.

"...first Hogsmeade trip is..." continued George

"...the first weekend in October," concluded Fred.

"How about having everyone who's interested meet us in the village?" they chorused.

"Least we'd get a better idea of numbers," said Luna.

"And we're going to need to find a place to do this," said Colin, "I don't think that we could do much here."

Harry nodded, "I don't feel like sharing this place either."

Headmaster Dumbledore eased himself back in his chair, sucking on a lemon drop as he contemplated his next course of action, watching the replay of his memories from the previous year when Harry had physically assaulted him through the events of the summer and redrew the same conclusions he had previously drawn. Harry was walking down a dark and dangerous path and the boy must be brought back under his direction and control. The how of it remained the problem. Quidditch could have served as a way to mend the rift, but even after persuading Angelina to make Ron Keeper, he had not foreseen Delores's input that had seen Harry quit the team!

What worsened the situation was Ron's position as "oath breaker" to Harry and his allegiances in Slytherin, a true wild card. Sirius... there had been neither a word from him nor a sighting of him since he disappeared during the previous year. Hagrid was still with Madame Maxime, attempting to make some kind of headway with the Giants but that was a fools' errand, and he knew it. As if that was not bad enough, the boy had actually subverted members from his own organization.

How in the world did the Weaselys, Lupin and Lovegood think that they had a better chance siding with a 15-year-old wizard? Harry had recruited some of the best and brightest to his cause and they

still stood by him, but he was Albus Dumbledore! Leader of the Light! Vanquisher of Grindenwald!

Popping another lemon drop in his mouth, he composed a brief note to Mundungus Fletcher. The first Hogsmeade weekend was coming up, and Fletcher would be Harry's shadow for the day. He needed something to get himself back in Harry's good graces, or something to hold over the boy.

The departure of Harry and his friends was delayed by Filch, scanning the students as they left the castle, which was a subject of amusement on their walk to Hogsmeade, "As if we would smuggle something out of Hogwarts!" said George with a snort.

"He should be worried about what we try to bring in!" agreed Fred.

"Well.... You two do owe me a Hogwarts toilet seat," said Harry suddenly, "Dumbledore mentioned you tried to give me one at the end of my first year." In high spirits at getting not only out of the castle but also away from Umbridge's creeping, snarky presence, there was another surprise when the teens ran in to Blake and Remus, apparently "stopping in" for a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks. "I wanted to talk to you about something Harry," said Blake, "Well, we wanted to talk to you about something."

He eyed the pair of marauders cautiously, "Do I need to alert the Prank Masters that a war is about to begin?" He smirked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not quite," said Blake mildly, "But we got an interesting letter from Neville, about you having teaching aspirations." Insightful as always, Neville had slipped off to the bathroom a few minutes prior, leaving one empty seat and his butterbeer unattended.

"We were wondering if there was anything we could do to help?" replied Remus.

"Aw... hell," said Harry, "I ain't decided if I am going to teach, let alone know how many I might wind up teaching."

"Thing is," said Colin hesitantly, "I've sounded out most of the fourth years in our house, and well, word spread. Fourth years alone... twenty students total."

Ginny chose that moment to add, "Add another twelve from my year."

"Twenty eight across the Sixth and Seventh years," chorused the twins.

Neville sat down hesitantly under Harry's burning gaze, "You've got thirty from our year: Everyone from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, and most of Ravenclaw too." The young man toyed with his butterbeer for a moment, and then vanished its contents and waved to Madame Rosemerta for another, much to the amusement of everyone at the table. He did not even break a sweat, "I left a drink unattended in the presence of The Prank Masters Generals - all three of them. Did you actually think I would drink it?"

Laughter broke the tension of the moment, but Harry could not let it go, "Seventy students," he said, "out of six hundred... could have been worse I suppose."

"Where are you planning on meeting your potential or actual recruits?" asked Blake. Harry realized that was a damn good question. Harry stared at Blake who met his gaze without flinching, "They want to learn from you and that means they believe you. They will follow you if need be."

The battery of charms were cast by four different individuals, ensuring that they conversation was private, and secure, "For Legion?" asked Neville." Blake nodded, "Makes sense." They had spent a summer afternoon trashing out the name of whatever it was that Harry was building, his own organization. They had been unable to agree and settled on just calling in "Legion" for now.

Harry thought about it: Seventy teenage wizards, without full wands rights, against Death Eaters, Giants, Boggarts, Dementors, Inferi and everything else a demented Dark Lord could get his hands on. "I can teach them to fight... but not to kill," he said with a breath, "But I can teach them to defend and to be smart and run like hell." His eyes bore a hard edge to them, "Reasonable?" As a group, they knew better than to push him, "Where are we meeting?"

"I've told the others to meet us in the Hog's Head, that other pub, you know the one, it's not on the main road. I think it's a bit... you

know... dodgy... but students don't normally go in there, so I don't think we'll be overheard," said Luna.

The door swung open and all traffic stopped for a long moment and in that instant, Harry already had his wand in his hand before he could even take in the sight before him. "God damn, she looks good," thought Harry as he slipped his wand back in to its holster before working his way through the array of gawking students towards her. She gave him a smile that simply lit up the room as he pulled her in to a brief hug that raised more than a few eyebrows at the table, "What are you doing here?" he asked.

She froze for a moment herself, wondering what had triggered the sudden change in him given that they were not only with friends and family but also in full view of the public, including more than a few students from Hogwarts who were busy staring. Then he did the unthinkable and actually kissed her. It was a mere brush across the lips, but it almost had her swooning. Weak in the knees, she grabbed on to his arms for a moment to steady herself, before she could answer the question, "Just... wanted to see, especially since you weren't coming... home for the weekend."

He smiled, "I'm glad you're here." Oblivious to the crowd of now buzzing students, the group left the Three Broomsticks and walked down the main street past Zonko's Wizzarding Joke Shop. At the post office, Blake and Remus both left the teens to themselves and their plans with a few final words of advice. The teens turned up a side street at the top of which stood a small inn. A battered wooden sign hung from a rusty bracket over the door, with a picture on it of a wild boar's severed head, leaking blood on to the white cloth around it. The sign creaked in the wind as they approached. All three of them hesitated outside the door.

"Hey! Don't go getting cold feet on me now! This was not my idea!" Harry pushed open the door and led the way inside.

It was not at all like the Three Broomsticks, whose large bar gave an impression of gleaming warmth and cleanliness. The Hog's Head comprised one small, dingy and very dirty room that smelled strongly of something that might have been goats. The bay windows were so encrusted with grime that very little daylight could permeate the room, which was lit instead with the stubs of candles sitting on rough wooden tables. The floor seemed at first glance to be

compressed earth, though as Harry stepped on to it he realized that there was stone beneath what seemed to be the accumulated filth of centuries.

Harry remembered Hagrid mentioning this pub in his first year, "Yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hogs Head," he had said, explaining how he had won a dragon egg from a hooded stranger there. At the time, Harry had wondered why Hagrid had not found it odd that the stranger kept his face hidden throughout their encounter; now he saw that keeping your face hidden was something of a fashion in the Hog's Head.

There was a man at the bar whose whole head was wrapped in dirty grey bandages, though he was still managing to gulp endless glasses of some smoking, fiery substance through a slit over his mouth. Two figures shrouded in hoods sat at a table in one of the windows and Harry might have thought them Dementors if they had not been talking in strong Yorkshire accents, and in a shadowy corner beside the fireplace sat a witch with a thick, black veil that fell to her toes. They could just see the tip of her nose because it caused the veil to protrude slightly.

"I don't know about this, Luna," Harry muttered, as they crossed to the bar. He was looking particularly at the heavily veiled witch. "Has it occurred to you Umbridge might be under that?"

She turned, casting an appraising eye over the veiled woman, while three others surreptitiously palmed the wands. "Umbridge is shorter than that woman," she said quietly, "And anyway, even if Umbridge does come in here there's nothing she can do to stop us."

"That much she's right about," said Colin, "double-checked with McGonagall and she says any kind of study group or homework club is legal. Then I triple-checked with Flitwick: There is no rule about us meeting anywhere in Hogsmeade."

The barman sidled towards them out of a back room. He was a grumpy-looking old man with a great deal of long grey hair and beard. He was tall and thin and looked vaguely familiar to Harry, "What?"

"Butterbeer, three bottles," said Colin, refusing to be cowed in the slightest.

The barman sized him up for a long moment, and then nodded, imperceptibly, seemingly impressed with Colin's courage, "Six Sickles, and I ain't selling any of you kids anything stronger."

"I'll have a Fire Whiskey," challenged Harry. The Barman's eyes travelled over Harry, resting for a fraction of a second on the scar over his forehead, before pulling down a bottle and pouring out a single measure. Harry dropped a Galleon on the counter and the bartender eyes widened "Leave the bottle."

Harry held the glass up to the light and channeled his magic, chilling the glass before taking a sip of what the label claimed was "Ogden's 36 Year Single Malt." The whiskey burned the back of his throat and left a trail of fiery tendrils in to his stomach. Everyone else eyed Harry, as he poured out a second measure, considering there was at least another two measures in the bottle. "So, who did you say is supposed to be meeting us?" Harry asked, chilling the second measure.

There was a sudden crush of people struggling to enter. Dean and Lavender were followed closely by Pavarti and Padma Patil. Cho was accompanied by her usual gang of giggling girlfriends. Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, followed by Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbott. A Hufflepuff girl with a long plait down her back whose name Harry did not know; three Ravenclaw boys he was pretty sure were Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner and Terry Boot. And on they came, "Bloody hell guys," said Harry, "you told me seventy, not the whole fucking school."

Harry turned to the bartender who had his mouth hanging open, and no wonder. He doubted the place had ever been so packed before. He dropped ten galleons on the bar, "Butterbeer all round."

Fortunately, the influx of students strove to drive many of the other patrons from the bar, except for the veiled witch. He eyed the man critically, wondering for a long moment before deciding against literally raping the person's mind. However, he doubted that there was anything he could do, legally to get her to leave - at least not legally anyway. Moreover, the next Hogsmeade weekend was too far off... waiting so long would defeat the purpose of trying to get a study group started. He eyed the witch again and shook his head,

they were going to have to make do with what they had. "Charms in place," said Neville quietly. Harry nodded and just stood, leaning against the bar and waited.

When everybody was seated on a chair or table, the chatter died out as all eyes turned on to Harry. He stood, drained his glass, and took a deep breath. He looked around the room at the ocean of faces, "See a lot of faces here. So I have to ask you: Why are you here?"

They looked like a bunch of deer caught in the headlights, "Are you here because you want to get an OWL in Defense against the Dark Arts?" there was a scattering of murmured agreement, some nodding heads. "Are you here, because you want to learn how to fight?" this was greeted by silence, "If you want to learn Defense, then the first thing you need to learn is that the best defense is a good offense. That means you need to learn how to fight, and be prepared for what's out there."

"You're talking about Voldemort?" whispered Cho Chang.

His gaze was predatory as he locked eyes with her, "Yeah. I am."

"Where's your proof that he's back?" the challenge came from someone in Hufflepuff, and Harry realized in that moment why so many of them were here: They wanted to hear his story first hand.

"You gotta a name?" countered Harry.

"Terry Boot."

"Ok Terry," he replied evenly, "You need proof. I can give you proof: Cedric Diggory, was... is my friend. Hermione...Granger," he stumbled over the name, and had to take a breath to calm himself, "was my girlfriend." That was harder to say than he ever thought possible, "How many of you know what kind of wand I have? Come on, don't be shy. It a simple question. What kind of wand do I have?"

It took a few minutes but the room came back with the consensus that it was Holly and Phoenix Feather. "Anybody here know Hermione's wand?" That took a few minutes longer and nobody was really sure, "It's OK. I know: Ten and three-quarter inch vine wood with dragon heartstring." Harry produced the wand he had been using since the end of the Third Task, and pointed it towards the

ceiling, "By life, and by my magic," he intoned, "may I be struck down if I tell a falsehood. I Harry James Potter, bearer of the wand of Hermione Jane Granger, so swear that I saw the rebirth of Voldemort, dueled him and escaped with my life, this wand, the wand of Cedric Diggory, and..." he choked for a moment before pushing on relentlessly, "the body of Hermione Jane Granger."

A glow enveloped him for a moment, and then faded, "I'm sure all of you are familiar with an oath made upon a wizard's own magic." He chuckled darkly, "And I'm still standing here." He paused to let that sink in, "That's what makes me say Voldemort," he ignored the shudder that ran through the group, "is back. If that isn't enough, nothing is going to be. And I ain't going to waste my time trying to convince you." He didn't need to add where the door was or what they should do if they didn't believe him.

The thought of doing something similar to wake up the wizarding world had not only crossed his mind, but also those of Marinashka and even Griphook, at his trial. But they had both shot the idea down, citing that the ministry would use it as proof of his insanity... so far gone he "completely believes his own insane ranting." The prophet had done too much damage by that point for anything Harry said to be taken seriously.

"So... like I was saying... if you want to learn some defense, then we need to work out how we're going to do it, how often we're going to meet and where we're going to ☐"

"Is it true," interrupted the girl with the long plait down her back, looking at Harry, "that you can produce a Patronus?" There was a murmur of interest around the group at this.

"For fuck's sake," said Harry, "Expecto Patronum!" Prongs burst forth from his wand, as solid as ever but did not charge. It merely stood its group, snorted once and looked to Harry, then seemed to lean against the bar, as if waiting for something, "Maybe he wants a butterbeer..." he thought.

The veiled witch sitting alone shifted very slightly in her seat. However, he now had everyone's undivided attention. "So here's the deal. You want to learn defense. That's fine. But the first thing you need to know is that I've had a lot of help from a lot of people. So it's going to take time to –"

"Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?" said a blonde boy at the back of the room.

"Here's an idea," cut in Fleur acidly before he could react, "Why don't you shut your mouth?" she was clearly about to hex the speaker when Harry took her hand in his. She glared at him as he shook his head. She turned to the speaker, "In case you all forget, I was there. I was in the tournament. I... have nightmares about what happened. And I stand by him, still."

"Well said," said Luna serenely, "moving on... the point is, are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?" There was a murmur of general agreement, even though blondie had his arms up and folded across his chest, keeping a close eye on Fleur. "Then we need to find a time that suits everyone."

"Now the last thing on the agenda," said Luna, "Does anybody know a place in the castle we could use to practice?"

"Right, well, we'll try to find somewhere," said Harry, "We'll send a message round to everybody when we've got a time and a place for the first meeting. Just remember this: What we are doing, what we will do, cannot get out, to anyone not here. If word gets out, there's no telling what could happen. Not just to me, but to all of us."

It was clear that they were done. With those words, the group began to break up in twos and threes, going their separate ways as the Harry, surrounded by friends made their way back in to the sunlight. "Harry?" Fleur nodded discreetly towards the bar.

"Wha.. oh yeah," he snapped his finger at Prongs who vanished in a puff of silvery smoke. "Could I escort you to lunch?" he asked Fleur.

"You may," she replied, "I heard, but never had the opportunity to visit Madame Puddifoots..."

Chapter 37

Educational Decree Number Twenty-four

Sunday dawned bright and Harry spent the weekend relaxed, doing nothing more interesting than spending time with Fleur, reading, doing a little practice here and there with her, and just generally killing time. It made a difference, he realized, knowing that they were doing something to resist Umbridge and the ministry's idea of teaching and education. That and he realized that he was not alone. Seventy odd students was not much but it was a start.

When he returned to Hogwarts on Sunday afternoon via the Floo in the residence, he managed to step out of the fireplace instead of falling out and then ascended the stairs before walking what felt like an ice cold shower, "Myrtle? What are you doing here?"

The Fidelius Charm had worked well, he realized with a start, perhaps a little too well: The castle's ghosts could not find the tunnel or the residence. He made a mental note to talk to the Lady about that. "Umbridge is looking for you," she said, "No idea what for but she's been in and out of your common room and the library at least four times today!"

"Has she checked the grounds?" he asked, "Around the lake, or Hagrid's?"

"No."

He still had his bag slung over one shoulder and was wearing his school robes, "Thanks Myrtle," he said, "Oh yeah, can you pass a message to the Lady for me? I would like to speak to her, as soon as possible." The ghost nodded and floated down through the floor to relay the message. Harry on the other hand pulled his invisibility cloak from his pocket, and cast a disillusionment charm on himself before covering himself in the cloak and apparating down to the edge of the lake.

It took him only a few minutes and a few warming charms to set everything up, before stuffing the cloak and lifting the charm. When Umbridge showed up, almost fifteen minutes later, he was genuinely absorbed in the text about Animagus transformations at the base of what was the only tree left on the shores of the Black Lake.

"Mr. Potter," she said sweetly, "I would like a word with you."

He looked at her over the top of his book, raising an eyebrow. This was about to get, interesting, "Something I can do for you?" he gave her just long enough to open her mouth before adding, "Professor?"

"Yes. I want to know where you have been for the last day," she simpered, "I noticed you were not with your friends and..."

He began packing his books away, shoving them carelessly in to his back before standing up, bag slung over his shoulder. Incredible that he was fifteen and seemed to have a good eight inches in height over her, "She is actually short enough for somebody to step on her," he thought, wondering if he could convince Hagrid to do it somehow. He shrugged, "None of your business."

"It is my business, if you have been leaving the grounds of Hogwarts for an illicit rendezvous somewhere," she replied, "you forget that not only am I professor but also the High Inquisitor sent by the Minister himself...."

"And you forget," Harry barked, "that I am an emancipated minor, and as such I am not bound by the regular rules that apply to under aged students. I can leave the grounds on weekends as and when I please! Where I go is none of your business, what I do is none of your business." He found himself suddenly very... irritated, wanting to do nothing more than hex the toad standing before, but clamped down on the urge, "I will see you in class tomorrow. You are damaging my calm and have ruined my weekend." He turned his back on her, "Go away."

She spluttered incoherently as he stalked away, fuming, "Bitch knows how to ruin a weekend and a good mood." Monday was no better, especially since he faced his worst classes. When he arrived at the Great Hall, there was a cluster of students around a notice board. It was large, covering everything else on it, printed in large black letters and there was a highly official-looking seal at the bottom beside a neat and curly signature.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

All student organizations, societies, teams, groups and clubs are henceforth disbanded. An organization, society, team, group or club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to reform may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge). No student organization, society, team, group or club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an organization, society, team, group or club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-four.

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge,

High Inquisitor

Harry read the notice over the heads of some anxious-looking second-years. "Does this mean they're going to shut down the Gobstones Club?" one of them asked his friend.

"I reckon you'll be OK with Gobstones," Harry said darkly, making the second-year jump. "I don't think we're going to be as lucky," thought Harry, his insides pulsing with rage. Umbridge was clearly behind this, but more worryingly, there was a leak.

Harry did not turn around when the presence stopped at his shoulder, "This isn't a coincidence," said Neville, "She knows."

"That damn witch in the pub... and let's face it, we don't know how many of the people who turned up we can trust... any of them could have run off and told Umbridge..."

Moreover, he had thought they believed him, thought they even admired him.

"Zacharias Smith!" said Neville, "Blondie with a big mouth," he explained, "Or – well, could be Michael Corner.... He looked shifty to me."

Judging by the intensity of the chatter and an extra measure of movement in the Hall as people scurried up and down their tables conferring on what they had read. Harry had barely taken their seats when Colin, Fred, George and Ginny descended upon them.

"Did you see it?"

"Reckon she knows?"

They were all looking at Harry. He glanced around to make sure there were no teachers near them. "We're going to do it anyway of course," he said quietly.

"Knew you'd say that," said George, beaming and thumping Harry on the arm.

Harry looked around the Great Hall and realized something, something important, everyone he could remember being at the meeting was... actually making eye contact. The questions were clearly written on their faces and several were actually coming towards him, "The idiots can't come over here now, it'll look really suspicious!" thought Harry desperately. He took a moment and sent out his magic. It was tricky, and he was not sure he could do it, not without a wand to channel the magic, "Watched by Umbridge! SIT DOWN!" he screamed in his mind. Ernie and Hannah both stumbled, and went down together in a tangle of limbs, "Talk to you later!" a little less forcefully. He knew he would owe them and a half dozen other people an apology.

But the full repercussions of the sign were not felt until they were leaving the Great Hall for History of Magic. "Harry, can I have a word?" It was Angelina and she looked perturbed about something. He eyed the taller Quidditch Captain for a moment, making her feel incredibly uncomfortable. Neville nodded to Harry and kept walking, She hesitated, fidgeted as if she was not sure how to start, "First of, I just... wanted to say thanks you know? You, lending Ginny your Firebolt, it is going to make a difference. And the twins..."

He shrugged. He did not need nor want her thanks, "My property, so I can lend it to whomever I want. What else?" he blinked, "Wait a sec... what about the twins?"

"Well... I just thought that when you quit the Quidditch team, you'd have told the twins and I thought I would be looking for a new Seeker, and Beaters as well as a Keeper..." she sensed he was about to interrupt and pressed on hurriedly, "I also wanted to say thanks as well for not throwing me out on Saturday. I mean, our history is well..."

"Why don't you get it?" he snapped, "You're not my favorite person right now, that's true. But, I won't throw anyone to the wolves. When it happens, it will be harsh, bloody and violent. People will die, and everyone, even those who don't want to get caught in the middle should be able to defend themselves." He took a dangerously quiet step forward, "And I don't need other people fighting my battles for me. Our differences are settled, as far I'm concerned. Now, I've got to get class."

He walked past when she asked a question, "Would you consider... consider rejoining the Quidditch team?"

"No," he said turning back to face her, "You know that there is nothing but bad blood between Ron and me. That is between him and me. I can't, and won't put myself within striking distance of an enemy, especially when I might have my back to him." There was another question on the tip of Angelina's tongue - at least he thought there was, "Just so you know, if you kick him off the team to get me back, I won't come back."

He progressed towards his next class. It was a wrench, even if he would only admit it to himself. He loved Quidditch and that would have made this year tolerable, bearable even. Flying could still give him that sense of freedom, but without the thrill of the chase, the challenge of a bludger, it was not the same. Not that he really cared - at least that is what he told himself.

History of magic was as boringly pointless as ever, and he was not the only one lying with his head on his arm, eyes glazed, staring almost sightlessly in to the near distance. He felt equally dazed when class ended and like everyone, he staggered out of the room

Descending the steps in to the dungeons, he snapped out of his stupor by the sound of Draco Malfoy's arrogant tones just outside Snape's classroom, waving around a scrap of parchment. "Yeah, Umbridge gave the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to continue playing straightaway; I went to ask her first thing this morning. Well, it was pretty much automatic, I mean, she knows my father really well, he's always popping in and out of the Ministry... it'll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, won't it?"

"Don't," said Neville quietly, "It's exactly what he wants."

"I mean," said Malfoy, raising his voice a little more, his grey eyes glittering malevolently in Harry's direction, "No offense Ron, but if ministry influence is needed, they don't have a chance do they? Your father just does not have that kind of influence. But he's never wanted it, which is completely different from not having it."

"It's true," said Ron with sad sort of smile, "He doesn't like politics, let alone office politics so he just... stays out of it."

"Well don't worry;" said Draco with a laugh, "They'll be carting Potter off to St. Mungos to have that magic addled brain of his examined." Malfoy made a grotesque face, his mouth sagging open and his eyes rolling, Crabbe and Goyle gave their usual grunts of laughter.

Ron drew his wand and poked the slack faced Draco with it, "It is my humble opinion, that this patient is completely addled!" Pansy Parkinson shrieked with glee.

Something collided hard with Harry's shoulder, knocking him sideways. A split second later, he realized that Neville had just charged past him wand drawn and raised, heading towards Malfoy and Ron. The tip of his wand flared a dangerous blood red. Harry leapt forward, "Neville!"

He managed to grab the back of his friend's robes and drag him back. Harry cast a calming charm but Neville's blood was up, and he succeeded in breaking free of Harry's hold, tearing his robes in near desperation. Harry had no choice as he locked his arm around Neville's throat and began to squeeze Malfoy as his sycophants stared in shock.

Dean was the first to help Harry pull Neville back, "What's gotten in to him?" asked Dean as he struggled to keep his grip, half pushing, half pulling them to the back of the line of waiting Gryffindors.

Neville's face was scarlet; the pressure Harry was exerting on his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but odd words spluttered from his mouth, "Not... funny... don't... Mungo's... show... him..."

The dungeon door opened. Snape appeared there. His black eyes swept up the Gryffindor line to the point where Harry, Neville and Dean were a tangle of limbs, "Fighting, Potter, Thomas, Longbottom?" Snape said in his cold, sneering voice. Ten points from Gryffindor. Release Longbottom, Potter, or it will be detention. Inside. All of you."

Harry let go of Neville, who stood panting and glaring at him. "I had to stop you," Harry said a little short of breath as he picked up his bag, "You hex them in to oblivion and then Snape would have done the same to you!"

Neville said nothing; he merely snatched up his own bag and stalked off into the dungeon. "What in the name of Merlin," asked Dean "was that about?"

Harry did not answer. He knew exactly why the subject of people who were in St Mungo's because of magical damage to their brains was highly distressing to Neville, but he had sworn to keep Neville's secret. Even Neville did not know Harry knew.

Harry took his usual seats at the back of the class, pulled out parchment, quills and "One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi." The class around them was whispering about what Neville had just done, but when Snape closed the dungeon door with an echoing bang, everybody immediately fell silent. "You will notice," said Snape, in his low, sneering voice, "that we have a guest with us today."

He gestured towards the dim corner of the dungeon and Harry saw Professor Umbridge sitting there, clipboard on her knee. The two teachers he hated most. It was hard to decide which one he wanted to triumph over the other. "We are continuing with our Strengthening Solution today. You will find your mixtures as you left them last

lesson; if correctly made they should have matured well over the weekend □ instructions □" he waved his wand again "□ on the board. Carry on."

Professor Umbridge spent the first half hour of the lesson making notes in her corner. Harry was very interested in hearing her question Snape. He stopped working just to watch as Umbridge got to her feet. "Ha," he said softly, as she strode between two lines of desks towards Snape, who was bending over Deans' cauldron.

"Well, the class seems fairly advanced for their level," she said briskly to Snape's back, "Though I would question whether it is advisable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus."

Snape straightened up slowly and turned to look at her, "Now... how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?" she asked, her quill poised over her clipboard.

"Fourteen years," Snape replied. His expression was unfathomable. Harry, watching him closely, added a few drops to his potion; it hissed menacingly and turned from turquoise to orange.

"You applied first for the Defense against the Dark Arts post, I believe?" Professor Umbridge asked Snape.

"Yes," said Snape quietly.

"But you were unsuccessful?"

Snape's lip curled, "Obviously"

Professor Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard, "And you have applied regularly for the Defense against the Dark Arts post since you first joined the school, I believe?"

"Yes," said Snape quietly, barely moving his lips. He looked very angry.

"Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?" asked Umbridge.

"I suggest you ask him," said Snape jerkily.

"Oh, I shall," said Professor Umbridge, with a sweet smile.

"I suppose this is relevant?" Snape asked as his black eyes narrowed.

"Oh yes," said Professor Umbridge, "yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers'... backgrounds."

She turned away, walked over to Pansy Parkinson and began questioning her about the lessons. Snape looked round at Harry and their eyes met for a second. Harry hastily dropped his gaze to his potion, which was now congealing foully and giving off a strong smell of burned rubber.

"No marks again, then, Potter," said Snape maliciously, emptying Harry's cauldron with a wave of his wand. "You will write me an essay on the correct composition of this potion, indicating how and why you went wrong, to be handed in next lesson, do you understand?"

"Yeah," said Harry, almost indifferent to the extra assignment.

During lunch, Harry actually debated skiving divination. However, he decided not to, just in case. Umbridge showed up for another inspection. Half an hour later, Harry took his seat in the hot, over perfumed atmosphere of the Divination classroom. Professor Trelawney was yet again handing out copies of The Dream Oracle. Harry knew he would rather get on with the bat gits punishment essay than sitting here trying to find meaning in made-up dreams.

Professor Trelawney slammed a copy of the Oracle down on the table between Ron and Seamus and swept away, her lips pursed; she threw the next copy at Harry, narrowly avoiding decapitating Seamus before thrusting the final one into Neville's chest with such force that he slipped off his puffs.

"Well, carry on!" said Professor Trelawney loudly, her voice high-pitched and somewhat hysterical, "you know what to do! Or am I such a sub-standard teacher that you have never learned how to open a book?"

The class stared perplexedly at her, then at each other. Harry, however, thought he knew what the matter was. As Professor Trelawney flounced back to the high-backed teacher's chair, her magnified eyes full of angry tears; he leaned his head closer to Neville's and muttered, "I think she's got the results of her inspection back."

"Professor?" said Parvati Patil in a hushed voice - she and Lavender had always rather admired Professor Trelawney, "Professor, is there anything ☐ er ☐ wrong?"

"Wrong!" cried Professor Trelawney in a voice throbbing with emotion. "Certainly not! I have been insulted, certainly... insinuations have been made against me... unfounded accusations leveled... but no, there is nothing wrong, certainly not!"

She took a great shuddering breath and looked away from Parvati, angry tears spilling from under her glasses.

"I say nothing," she choked, "of sixteen years of devoted service... it has passed, apparently, unnoticed... but I shall not be insulted, no, I shall not!"

"But, Professor, who's insulting you?" asked Parvati timidly.

"The Establishment!" said Professor Trelawney, in a deep, dramatic, wavering voice. "Yes, those with eyes too clouded by the mundane to See as I See, to Know as I Know... of course, we Seers have always been feared, always persecuted... it is ☐ alas ☐ our fate."

She gulped, dabbed at her wet cheeks with the end of her shawl, and then she pulled an embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve, and blew her nose very hard with a sound like Peeves blowing a raspberry.

Ron sniggered. Lavender shot him a disgusted look.

"Professor," said Parvati, "do you mean... is it something Professor Umbridge ☐?"

"Do not speak to me about that woman!" cried Professor Trelawney, leaping to her feet, her beads rattling and her spectacles flashing. "Kindly continue with your work!"

And she spent the rest of the lesson striding among them, tears still leaking from behind her glasses, muttering what sounded like threats under her breath, "... may well choose to leave... the indignity of it... on probation... we shall see... how she dares..."

"You and Umbridge have got something in common," Neville, told Harry when they met again in Defense against the Dark Arts. "She obviously reckons Trelawney's an old fraud, too... looks like she's put her on probation."

Umbridge entered the room as he spoke, wearing her black velvet bow and an expression of great smugness. "Good afternoon, class."

"Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge," they chanted dully.

"Wands away," However, there was no answering flurry of movement this time; nobody had bothered to take out their wands. "Please turn to page thirty-four of Defensive Magical Theory and read the third chapter, entitled 'The Case for Non-Offensive Responses to Magical Attack'. There will be "

" no need to talk," Harry along with nearly the entire class echoed under their breath.

Entering the common room that night, he overheard Angelina talking to the team, "No Quidditch practice," said Angelina in hollow tones, "She just said she needed a bit of time to consider."

"Consider what?" said Ron angrily. "She's given the Slytherins permission, why not us?" Harry could imagine how much Umbridge was enjoying holding the threat of no Gryffindor Quidditch team and could easily understand why she would not want to relinquish that weapon over them too soon.

Harry slumped down into a chair, dragged his Potions essay reluctantly from his bag and set to work. It was very hard to concentrate; there was also an incredible amount of noise in the room: Fred and George appeared finally to have perfected one type of Skiving Snack box, which they were taking turns to demonstrate to a cheering and whooping crowd.

First, Fred would take a bite out of the orange end of a chew, at which he would vomit spectacularly into a bucket they had placed in front of them. Then he would force down the purple end of the chew, at which the vomiting would immediately cease. Lee Jordan, who was assisting the demonstration, was lazily vanishing the vomit at regular intervals with the same Vanishing Spell Snape kept using on Harry's potions.

What with the regular sounds of retching, cheering and the sound of Fred and George taking advance orders from the crowd, Harry was finding it exceptionally difficult to focus on the correct method for Strengthening Solution.

Harry watched George projectile-vomit into the bucket, gulp down the rest of the chew and straighten up, beaming with his arms wide to protracted applause. "You know, I don't get why Fred and George only got three OWLs each," said Harry, watching as Fred, George and Lee collected gold from the eager crowd. They really know their stuff."

Neville grunted something non-committal and Harry tossed his quill down, "Neville, you alright?"

"St. Mungos," he said quietly, "it's true you know? What Malfoy said about too much magic, and how it can... damage the brain."

Harry met Neville's gaze, and recognized that haunted, almost hunted thousand yard stare. He had worn it himself often enough. Still did when no one was looking. He debated his choices, and made one, "What Malfoy said was true?"

Neville nodded, "Some curses can kill, others cause pain, but... the Cruciatus Curse... that curse... it only ends when the caster wants it to end." They were committed now, one to listen, the other to speak, "My parents... they were Aurors in the war. After Volde-Voldemort fell, a number of his Death Eaters were convinced my parents knew something and were captured and..."

"They died?" he asked quietly. He had only ever seen fragments, bits and pieces of that trial, with the Lestranges' and Barty Crouch Junior, and he assumed that death was as bad as it got.

Neville shook his head, and wiped a single tear away, "If only they had," he said bitterly, "In a way Harry, you're luckier than me. Your parents died, that night and there's... finality to that, closure, sort of, you know?" Harry nodded warily, not sure where this was going, "I-I visit my parents, during the holidays in St. Mungos...they don't recognize me."

Harry cursed to himself. Another bound to him by hate. He was starting to hate that, "You're right," he said at last, "You've got the worst of it." He did not know what else to say. When he had learned of Neville's past the year before, Griphook had advised him to let the past stay buried because when you dig it up, all anyone ever gets is dirty. He had taken that advice to heart and was not about to go back on his word to keep that secret. "How much powdered griffin horn does this damn potion need anyway?"

Chapter 38

Pleasure and Pain

Another two weeks seemed to fly by, and Harry was not sure how late it was, but it had to be just past midnight. Neville had gone to bed, along with just about everyone else in Gryffindor. He was the last man standing, or rather sitting. He was finding it somewhat odd: The more advanced his Occulemency and Legilimency became, it seemed like he needed less sleep than usual. His study of the phenomenon had confirmed that it was the former more than the later: Sleep was something that the brain required, partly to help sort and store memories subconsciously. However, an Occulumens, with their mind already better sorted and organized, tend to need less sleep. It left Harry with an extra two hours that he was not sure what he could do with besides read, study and train.

He felt the presence slip in to his mind, and knock politely against his mind shields, which immediately rose to their full strength, until he recognized the presence, "Lady Hogwarts," he said, "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"A pleasure as always Harry," she replied, "I apologize for taking so long, but I wanted to make certain preparations for this meeting. However, we should get down to business. How may I be of assistance?"

He took a few minutes to explain what it was he was trying to do, and how they had need of a place to train in secrecy, how he feared their betrayal. "It is an old muggle saying, "three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead,"" she laughed, "but it doesn't work when it has to be seventy can keep a secret if sixty-nine are dead."

"Are you asking for an opinion or advice Harry?"

"My girlfriend asked me that same question once," He replied, "Both. Give your advice, then your opinion."

"My advice would be to seek one in your employ who has worked within these walls. His knowledge of its secrets rivals that of the Weasely and even the Marauders before them. My opinion is that you take too much upon your young shoulders. Remember those who stand with you, remember that they will help you, but you must

first allow them to." He had no answer to that. He was already delegating a lot: Remus and Blake were both doing a lot to get things setup, and he had spared no expense in getting things done right the first time.

"Find a place, where you can be alone and Fawkes will come to find you. I hope that you trust us both enough to take a short trip with him?" She disappeared from his mind and he looked around the Common Room. It was late; the fire in the grate was more ashes than flame. He looked around the empty common room, "Fawkes?" he whispered.

There was a blaze of flame and the phoenix appeared before him. It bowed its head to him. Uncertain Harry bowed back. "Care for Magical Creatures has nothing on this," he thought, as he met the creature's gaze. The twinkle in its eye betrayed an intelligence, greater than that of any mere bird. Immortal, timeless, "You're supposed to take me somewhere?"

He walked to the edge of table with a thrill and hopped on to Harry's shoulder. The flames enveloped both of them, and they were warm, just comfortably warm. It took a matter of moments, before they reappeared on what looked like the castle grounds. He looked around and realized that things were different: The sunlight had no warmth; the Forbidden Forest did not... smell right. However, what was definitely wrong was the small cluster of trees along the shore of the lake.

What was even more out of the ordinary was the young woman leaning with her back against a tree, her face turned up towards the sun. She was tall, taller by at least five or six inches, with a long braid of raven black hair trailing down her back. She pushed off the tree and walked towards him.

Harry however, already had his wand in his hand and upraised, "Stand your ground!" he called, "Who are you and where am I?"

She laughed, "Your paranoia would do your "Mad-eye" Moony proud. We have already met. Do you not recognize the sound of my voice?" she teased.

"Lady Hogwarts? Rowena?" he lowered his wand. At least that explained the preparations part of things. She nodded, "Then where are we?"

"Within one of the many paintings that actually adorn the roof of the Great Hall," she smiled, "the enchanted ceiling conceals this painting from the eyes of all - magical or otherwise. It has been my home, these many centuries."

He realized her existence must have been truly long and incredibly lonely, "Rowena, I have to ask: Why help me?"

"For any number of possible reasons," she replied, "but the simple truth is that I can no longer in good conscience stand idly by as Albus Dumbledore leads the Light further in to shadow."

That came as a surprise to Harry, "You think that the headmaster has been corrupted by evil?" He was walking towards the edge of the lake, staring across the water. It was moving the wrong way, moving out towards the center of the lake instead of lapping at the shore.

"Harry you must accept that the world is not merely black or white. Light and Darkness are but the extremes, and neither can exist without the other. However, Albus Dumbledore is not the beacon of Light that he once was." They were walking along the edge of the lake now, "He has been so focused on the big picture that he is now tripping over what is directly in front of his nose."

"So what am I supposed to do? Take over from him?" Harry asked with a sarcastic smile.

"I pray that it does not come to that," she replied with absolutely seriousness, "But to defeat Voldemort, you may have to."

"I'm getting tired of having every fucking thing just dumped on my shoulders," he growled, "Why? Why me? Because I survived some damn curse as an infant?" he picked up a fistful of pebbles from the shore of the lake and sent one skipping across the surface, "Because I'm the child of some damn prophecy?" he threw another stone, "Because of that," he hurled another, "I'm supposed to do clean up for every lazy bastard out there?" Another stone went skipping across the lake.

"More wrist, less fingers," she advised. He looked at her blankly for a moment. "More wrist, less finger and they should go a little farther." He eyed her critically for a moment and then took the advice, and to his surprise found the stone skipping a half dozen times. He stared at her, wondering why the almost random change in topic.

"You can change the world Harry," she replied sending a stone skipping across the surface of the lake, "You are being given a unique opportunity."

"Give it to someone who wants it then," he replied, "I don't want it. I never asked for it."

"Alas," she replied with a weary shake of the head, "There is a fine line between coincidence and fate. And you actually walk that line, which is why you are the one who receives this opportunity." Harry gave her a look that stated clearly she should cut the dramatics and get to the point, "Think Harry! If fate gave this to Draco Malfoy, what would he do? Would Dumbledore be able to do the right thing? Perhaps for wizards, he could. But could he act for the greater good of the wizarding world? Look at those you call friend or ally! You treat all as equals whether their blood is pure or not! Wizard, Goblin, or House Elf! You have your friends making overtures to Centaurs and Werewolves! They follow you, because they believe you! They share your vision and they understand it: Not just to the defeat of Voldemort! But to do more! To reshape the wizarding world in to what it is supposed to be!"

"But what is the price?" he countered, darkly, "Who has to suffer? Do I have to be the one to choose who lives or dies?" He looked across the placid surface of the lake, shielding his eyes from the glare of the picture's setting sun, "My destiny, my fate, why is this mine?"

"Perhaps..." she shrugged, "I could give you some platitude about honor, duty, loyalty, but I think you would throw it back in my face. I do not know the future." She stood, "Harry, I have... existed for so long that I have no doubt I've forgotten some of what I have seen in the past. However, one thing I have seen and learned is that there is no such thing as predestined fate. The future will be what you choose to create."

He stood and stretched and she smiled, gently, like a benevolent mother, "It has been, an interesting conversation, I should let you get to bed for a proper night's sleep." She waved to one of the drawn trees and Fawkes swooped down and landed lightly on Harry's arm, "Good night Harry."

"Rowena," he said suddenly, "One last thing: The Residence can be found within the Bedrock of the Castle."

"I was wondering why Myrtle could not find it," she admitted, "But I did not want to pry in your affairs."

"Ask and if I can answer, I shall," he said, "Loyalty and honor, means trust and openness must exist between all parties involved. Good night Rowena." The phoenix seemed to weigh nothing as it rested there for a moment before taking Harry in a whirlwind of flame to deposit him back in the Gryffindor Common Room. Glancing at the clock, he was surprised at the lateness of the hour and thought for a long moment about where to sleep that night. He shuddered at the thought of sleeping alone, something he had not done willingly since... Fleur entered his life. He apparated to the residence where he had planned to sleep only for him to fall victim to an ambush the moment he walked through the front door.

The first slap took him off guard, "Harry!" A second slap to the shoulder, "James!" and a third, "Potter!" followed in rapid succession. He caught her hand before she could slap him again but it was too late to stop her. She went off in French, a verbal tirade of abuse that he had little difficulty in figuring out once she had pointed at the clock several times.

"Ummm..." he flicked the braid of hair over his ear "Oops?" he said sheepishly. Fleur was not a happy witch. He knew she was about to go off again. Again in French and he was not sure he could handle that. The low burning fire had leant a strangely pleasing fragrance to the room. That, however, was nothing compared to Fleur. She was wearing one of his shirts, and it barely covered what was important. The sight was more than a little distracting. "Is that my shirt?" he asked suddenly.

It threw her completely off track, "Yes it is." She answered, "What of it?"

"I don't recall saying you could help yourself to my wardrobe," he teased. She blushed, and Harry grinned at her, more than a little playful, "You should probably give that back," he said with mock seriousness, "It is my favorite shirt." It was clear from the way she was standing that he was not getting that shirt back, "Give, it back. Now," he commanded.

Halloween was less than a week away and their relationship had moved forward, in a series of fits and starts. He was definitely more affectionate, even in public ever since the Hogsmeade visits. She had asked and he had answered, stumblingly, halting but honestly: It just felt right: Time, place, everything had just felt right. She could not deny that the change was subtle but it had happened and things were slowly moving in the right direction as far as Fleur was concerned. Of course, the Veela in her was completely convinced that it should have moved in this direction more than a year ago. However, that was the Veela, not Fleur.

She could only recall seeing the same fire in his eyes on one occasion before, when they had gone for their first swim together at his mansion. The way he was looking at her was enough to set a fire alight in her soul, "but is it safe for me to take this off?" she teased him, effortlessly stepping out of his reach, "I don't think that I should." Her hand rested at the base of her throat and trailed down with an agonizing slowness.

"Oh I think you should," he said, advancing suddenly. She laughed, and again moved back, drawing him deeper in. his eyes locked with hers, but he seemed to follow her every move. She licked her lips, and to him, it was invitation. He stalked forward, like a jungle cat on the prowl, as her fingers toyed idly with the top button of the shirt, "I have to ask," her voice had changed, soft and velveteen in its smoothness, "is it the shirt you want? Her fingers undid the top button with practiced ease, "Or what's in the shirt?"

He stood a bare few inches away from her, before he answered, "Both!" His kiss caught her lips, slightly off guard as he pushed up against her, forcing her back first against the wall, hard enough to knock the wind out of her. She grabbed on to him, locking her arms around his neck as his hands wandered down her back. They were in perfect synchrony with each other. No words, no gestures,

nothing but the sound of their labored breaths between kisses as she effortlessly hooked her legs around his waist.

His kisses ran a trail along her cheek, and ran expertly down the side of her neck. He found that sweet spot at the base of her earlobe and she took a sharp breath. She could feel his smile as he nipped that spot gently and sucking every so lightly, making her shudder in pleasure, "I don't know where he learned..." Harry did it again, and her train of thought promptly derailed.

His strength came as no surprise to her - she had seen him working out and joined him, and continued her own physical training - but he held her without magic and simply carried her in to one of the residences many empty bedroom. Though nobody had been in it for months, Winky had kept in dust free and the bed neatly made. Neither of them could have cared as they collapsed atop the surprisingly firm mattress that bounced them apart.

Fleur laughed and he smiled at her, wolfishly. She was quicker off the mark, straddling him. His hands grasped her hips and snaked their way up her sides, along her ribs, running along her back as she leaned down and kissed him soundly, using her teeth to pull playfully on his lip.

He was caught up in a firestorm of emotions, as he felt his toes curl in pleasure he could feel her doing her best to restrain the Veela. With a start, he realized that she was experienced in this. Definitely way more experienced than him, and he had to wonder why she kept the Veela so contained, when this was what they do best. It was as if she was reading his mind, "If I let it out Harry," she whispered, nuzzling his cheek, "It won't stop. It is not a lover, it is a predator, a hunter, and it will have you as its prey."

His hands wandered, circling under her arms, to cup her breasts through his shirt, "It's a part of you," he whispered, her sapphire blue eyes holding his emerald gaze with hypnotic ease, "You can't deny it forever, Fleur. You shouldn't." Dim light from a single lamp illuminated them to each other. "Let it out." Her blond hair was a mess. "Please." His hair, she noted was as wild and untamed as ever.

She smiled, sat up, her back arched as she stretched, letting the shirt rise to reveal what seemed like miles of smooth, light, alabaster

skin. His hands moved up her taut stomach. He could feel the firm muscles beneath the skin but all he could do was revel in the feel of her skin and the way she shuddered in pleasure as he tweaked her nipples lightly.

He simply made her ache with longing, and desire. Months of patience, planning, careful seduction had lead to this moment. She could no longer tell whether it was what the Veela wanted, what she wanted or what they both wanted. But she knew this: She loved him. She had to have him. Tonight. Now. There, was no going back.

She had said the last aloud without realizing it but he agreed with that sentiment. There was no going back. "If it wants me," his fingers trailed, almost languidly across her nipples, "it can try its best to have me," His hands slid down and out from beneath the shirt, "That predator can prey on me for now, but eventually, I will make it my prey."

She wondered for a moment just how far along his relationship with Hermione had progressed, wondering at how one so young could seemingly find every place she could possibly be sensitive. Admittedly, she was not that much older than he was, but still. The way he used his hands to caress and stimulate had every nerve aflame. She could not help but wonder how good the sensations would be if their positions were reversed, with him on top, her perhaps blindfolded... perhaps even restrained.

Her mind lost its tentative grip upon reality for a long moment as one of his free hands found that damn near sacred spot on a woman and caressed it, ever so gently. "Propago iucunditas solvo quis est intus!" she was barely able to complete the incantation, releasing the block that kept the sexual aggression and the abilities of Veela to prolong the pleasure of such encounters in check.

He grinned up at her, as a wave of magic radiated from her. He had read about the blocks that Veela parents placed upon their children, limiting the influence of their Veela aspect upon others and upon their children. To release the block was something only mature, adult Veela could do. A full Veela, with no control over that aspect of their personality were what some believed to be the origins of the myths and legends of the Succubus.

He grabbed the shirt and she laid her hands over his, "I thought," she whispered, her voice simply dripped with suggestion, hint, promise, lust and desire and everything else he could imagine, "this was your favorite shirt?"

"I'm more in love with the woman, wearing the shirt."

Fabric ripped as buttons scattered across the room.

Hours later, he awoke with a start. The room smelled of sweat and sex, and it took him a long moment as it all came flooding back, everything that had transpired that evening or more accurately, this morning. He looked at the still sleeping woman next to him, one leg sticking out from underneath the blanket, her hair a mess, splayed across her pillow. Nothing... nothing in the world could compare with what he had experienced. She was exotic, beautiful; desirable...there were just no words to describe her, how he felt or how she made him feel. For the first time since Hermione had been taken from him, he actually felt truly alive. Not just alive but he now had a reason to do more than fight, but to stay alive and live. He had been going through the motions, to keep a promise he made to an echo. Now things were different. He had a reason to fight and it was lying next to him.

He glanced at his watch. It was too early to get up and yet too late to go back to sleep. He looked over at Fleur and his lust for her flared. She stirred in her sleep and he slid down next to her, relishing the feel of her cool skin against his own. It was like silk on silk, like heaven. His mind replayed everything that had happened. His... inexperience, innocence even, was something that Fleur had taken great delight in stripping away from him, one agonizing layer at a time. The things she had shown him, the things they had done to each other. It made his blood rise and he looked at his watch again, "Propago iucunditas," he nuzzled her neck.

She could feel the heat of his breath, the feather light kisses and felt herself stiffen involuntarily. She had thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it, especially educating him in the finer arts of pleasuring a woman. He had proven to be an incredibly quick study. She had unleashed that Veela within and together, had given each other incredible pleasure that had almost knocked him unconscious at one point. "Solvo quis est intus," she felt the blanket covering her back pushed lower, kisses flowing down her spine.

She rolled over and caught him in a kiss, one that he returned, eagerly, hungrily, "You just can't get enough..."

"Predator becoming prey," he challenged between kisses, "So soon? I expected more of a... challenge."

"Love to be your challenge," she practically cooed as he kissed his way down her body. Her skin tasted sweet and salty, musky with desire, "but you seem to have, something else in mind..."

He laughed, "Ladies before rouges," he said, he kissed her stomach and continued to work his way lower, leaving her hands clenching the sheets in pleasure.

He skipped his regular morning workout, knowing that he had enjoyed a thoroughly different work out that had lasted through most of the early hours of the morning. Fleur was seemingly unaffected by all of it, and he could not help but wonder how much of that was her and how much was the Veela. All he knew was that he ached in places he did not think were possible. However, it was a good kind of ache. He had half a mind to drop in Madame Pomfrey with a case of "Extreme sexual exhaustion," just to see how she would cope with it.

Fleur had left after nothing more fortifying than a cup of shared coffee with him. Though goblin's rarely take a deep interest in the lives of their non-goblin employees, the relationship between their Ursh-kai and Fleur was no secret. Many recognized the difference in her, the way she moved, there seemed to be more life, more energy in her step.

Bill Weasely had joked on more than one occasion that humans who hung around the goblins for too long began to adopt a number of goblin traits: Not being a morning person would top the list. However, as she moved, she gave off the unmistakable wave of positive energy that buoyed everyone, both human and goblin that came within ten feet of her. "Far too many shiny happy people this early in the morning," he grumbled good naturedly as she passed him with a smile and a nod.

From an alcove above the main floor of the bank, Griphook smiled with a mouthful of teeth before checking the impulse. He turned to

watch her make her way to her office, "He may yet save us all Fleur Delacour," whispered the Goblin, "And whether he stands with us, alone, or against us will all depend upon you." The Senior Accounts Manager made his way to his own office and took a seat at his desk. Although it was a little after nine in the morning, Griphook opened the bottom drawer of his desk and withdrew a single bottle of Old Ogden's finest and poured himself two finger's worth of the amber liquid. He sipped it, before turning his attention to the parchment and quill before him and started to write.

Percy Weasely had read the note three times and then burned it to avoid complications in case it was every found. He had been surprised at the level of Death Eater infiltration at the Ministry. They had people everywhere, ranging from the lowliest of the maintenance and cleaning personnel through to the ranks of the Aurors, Magical Transport, International Cooperation, even the Gobstones League and The Muggle Worthy Excuses Committee had been infiltrated.

He had met a number of them on his various trips around England, Scotland and Wales, even as far as Ireland via a mix of Portkey and Floo to prove his loyalty, and his worth. He had "exterminated" a number of Squibs, and even taken out several groups of muggles, always with Peter Pettigrew at his side.

Together, the odd pair walked along the corridor of Riddle Manor. While no longer used as their base of operations, it was still an excellent place to use as a staging ground before setting out on any mission. "It's not always going to be like this Perc," said Peter, "Right now, we're gearing up for a takeover, for war and its simply that the ends justify the means. When we are in power, we eliminate the squibs and half bloods in one fell swoop." Percy stayed silent. He was not foolish enough to swallow the propaganda, and he recognized indoctrination and brainwashing when he heard it. However, he was smart enough to play along, for now.

He might have been more than a little short changed when it came to money and magical power, but he had put everything on the line and was rightly confident that he had made a commitment to the winning side, or more accurately, the side that would give him everything he wanted. "I know, Peter," said Percy, "What I want to know is how many more muggles and squibs do I have to kill to prove my loyalty?"

They were standing in the same front room where Peter had tended to Voldemort before his rebirth. Flames leapt high in the fireplace, throwing a pool of warmth, yet somehow the light seemed muted, as if fearful of the shadows. Moreover, there were two shadows in the room worthy of fear: Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Only a few more, Percy Weasley," said Lord Voldemort. He acted on instinct, dropping to one knee before, bowing his head and missed the faint smile of approval at the gesture, "Rise Percy, rise." Voldemort grasped the young wizard by the shoulder, "I have heard nothing but positive reports of your actions. Peter in particular is impressed by you."

He was lost for words, and noticed the amusement on every other face present, "Thank you my Lord. I do what I can to help with our cause."

"I know, Percy. You have come to us at just the right time to ensure the purity of our blood, and our kind, thus securing our future but also to take a little fieldtrip. Perhaps you would care to join us."

The six members of the team grabbed a hold of the leather belt turned portkey and it was activated, depositing them in an alley a scant two-minute walk from a certain house, Percy had heard of but never visited: Number 4, Privet Drive, Little Whinging. "Bella, fetch the squib, Figg and bring her here." She nodded and headed off down the street, "Percy, let us see what you are made of."

He blinked in surprise, not certain what was expected of him. However, he took a firm step forward, and raised his wand, casting a scanning charm that revealed four occupants in the house. No wizards. There were wards, but only the most basic of magic repulsion wards, some charms and spells, and wards against apparition and portkey. Percy recast his scanning charms, frowning at the result, "My... Lord, there is no presence of anything resembling blood protection upon the building or its occupants."

"No," said Voldemort quietly, "There would not be. What with Potter's emancipation, he no longer calls this place home. Thus the Blood Protection would have faded, and now, you would be hard pressed to find even a trace of such old magic within the very wood and stone of the building."

A simple first year Alohomora unlocked the front door and Lord Voldemort led the way, with Peter and Percy close behind him as Crabbe and Goyle circled around the back of the house, in case they tried to run. They didn't. Their entrance had the four occupants of the house by complete surprise, and Peter had all four petrified within moments. Voldemort nodded, ever so slightly in approval and it made him a shiver a touch.

"Vernon, Petunia, my name is Lord Voldemort. I am sure that you have heard of me from both your nephew and that meddling bastard Dumbledore." He was polite, civil and it was utterly terrifying, 'If I had known you had guests over, I would have adjusted our numbers to ensure that we made up an even number to ensure no one was left unattended." He motioned to the front door where Bella was bringing Arabella Figg at wand point with a silencing charm already in place. With a shove, she stumbled and overbalanced striking the floor with a crack

"Ah, yes. Harry's babysitter. You spent fifteen years monitoring this house, keeping "tabs" on young Harry to make sure nothing went wrong. But a lot has gone wrong, especially since the second greatest wizard in the world is not here to rescue, since there are no longer any alarms or charms or spells of blood to protect any of you."

He removed the charms, now that the silencing charms and many others were in place on the walls, giving them absolute privacy.

"Please," pleaded the man, "we... you have..."

"Crabbe, Goyle, take a minute to show this filth its place and not to speak out of turn." The two goons introduced their fists to his stomach and face, making a mess of both as blood trickled from a broken nose and he struggled to breathe with four broken ribs. A snap of his fingers and they stopped, allowing him to continue his monologue with the four helpless muggles and the squib.

"Now this," Voldemort cupped Bella's cheek and she shuddered in pleasure, "is Bellatrix Lestrange, one of my most loyal servants and followers. She simply excels at torturing people in to insanity. Perhaps she can demonstrate her talents on one of your visiting nephews or nieces?"

She finally spoke, given that a broken jaw prevented her husband from speaking, "Please, why are you doing this? We've done nothing! We don't know you ! Any of you! Please...."

"True," he conceded, "Very true. But you see, killing you will hurt Potter and that is reason enough. So now we play a little game. You get to chose, since your husband is unable to speak, what happens to whom. He waved a hand at Bella, "Bella here will be taking turns with Percy, the only good apple in a rotten tree, to play with a curse or two or twenty. You pick a number, and then we shall see what happens," Voldemort smile was filled with evil and cruelty, but first, "You get to pick, whom first?"

She was no longer hysterical, having passed in to the state of mind where she fully expected to die in the next few hours. She looked up at them and spat in Voldemort's face. Bella was on her in moments, administering the cruciatus curse with sadistic glee. "Well if you don't want to play our game, you don't have to play," said Voldemort, as he patted Bella gently on the arm. She lifted the curse and looked at Voldemort, adoration in her gaze, "Percy, they are yours!"

He took his time, working them over with the Cruciatus curse, followed by a whole battery of other dark and illegal curses that he had read about but never had the courage or opportunity to try. True to his word, it lasted a little over two hours before all four were broken husks of their former selves, and Percy ended them a quartet of Avada Kedavra at close range.

"Well done Percy," said Voldemort, "I will leave you in Wormtail's capable hands to finish this assignment." With that, he left the two wizards to their own devices, apparating away. It was only when the pair were smashing up the place to make it look like a muggle robbery did Percy stumble across something of note. Given his experience in the Ministry, he had cultivated relationships and even contacts in the muggle government and as such recognized passports when he saw them. Idly, he flipped them open and read the names, and blinked, then read them again. Hastily he shoved them in to his pocket and went to find Peter.

"Peter! Look!" he thrust the documents in to the wizard's hands, "These are muggle identity papers and these say that..."

"This is not the Durselys," said Peter, catching on quick. He took the documents and set them ablaze, reducing them to smoke and ash in moments, "All records in the Ministry indicate that the Durselys still live here!" he thought.

"We need to tell Lord Voldemort!" said Percy nervously, "If he finds out..." It was a long held belief that that Peter Pettigrew was no great wizard and it was true enough: He was a genuinely below average student. However, a stunner is simple enough to cast when your enemy is facing the wrong way and Percy slumped, nearly bringing down an entire bookshelf on himself. He reached in to his pocket for a special portkey, gave it a twist and attached it to Percy.

The special project had been in need of magical "volunteers," and this was the perfect way to test the perfected blend of muggle science, magic and alchemy. It would work, and Percy would not have a clue. Not even Lord Voldemort himself would be the wiser! If it didn't there would not be enough left of Percy to identify. He could not loose.

Chapter 39

Gathering force

Harry's good mood was bulletproof for the rest of the week, and noted by his friends, but also by others. Snape and Umbridge had failed to get a rise out of Harry, and Draco's insults had little effect on Harry. Harry was sure that the Weasley trio were planning their revenge, "Remember now," he said playful, "Try not to break any bones and shed too much of his blood."

They had stared at him for a long moment, wondering whether he was kidding, until he had broken in to a smile, "Seriously, don't hurt him. Public humiliation would be a whole lot better. Or would you prefer using him as a tester for some of your new products?"

"Perhaps there is a way," said George

"Or perhaps more than one way to achieve that goal," said Fred.

Ginny had already come up with a few ideas that had the twins winching in agony. Something about a shrinking charm applied to clothing. That had been on Thursday morning. Harry and Fleur had ensured that they kept each other in the best of possible moods and he was finding it easier to keep up with the sexual predator that composed Fleur's Veela side, while thanking the fates that she was only part Veela. Lover or not, he doubted that any human could survive an encounter with a fully unleashed Veela lover.

Despite never having held a full meeting, numerous small meetings had taken place, in unused classrooms all over the school. His friends were teachers and tutors in all manner of subjects, ranging from those on the curriculum to providing a basis in many others not taught at Hogwarts. A number of students who, according to his friends, were honing Occulemency shields. Others were becoming amateur Geomancers taught by Ginny. There are dozens of hand-to-hand combat styles and everyone had found something to suit their personal taste, whether it was Goblin, Muggle or even from the Auror training manual. Regardless of its source, different moves and techniques were shared amongst them as sparring partners' swapped techniques and maneuvers with one another. This was not what Harry had originally planned, but it was undeniably effective.

He had told them, all of them, even Ginny and Luna, to use their best judgment. They had and the results spoke for themselves.

Harry had his hands full just keeping up with everyone else. However, it showed in his schoolwork as he began outstripping everyone in his year. The material was no challenge at all, except for three classes he knew he was doomed to fail: Potions on account of Snape, Divination because he was fed up of dying in every class and History because everyone who was not interested in a career in politics tended to sleep through it.

What had started out as a study group devoted to defense had grown in fits and starts and was now a homework club that covered every subject offered at Hogwarts. They were drifting, and he needed to bring them all back under control.

The Goblins had proposed using a series of magical contacts, similar to the one that had bound him during the Triwizard Tournament of the previous year. The contract, crafted under Marinashka's guidance and he read over the parchment one last time, trying to find any snags or exploitable loopholes, only to find none.

Part of the problem was that he was actually uncertain who had been at the Hogs Head meeting less than a month ago and now if what his friends were telling him was true, they had closer to 120 students involved. It escaped his notice that no one from Slytherin was involved in any of the study groups. Then, something else had been distracting him, teasing him for most of the evening. However, given their relationship, just being in the same room with each other was distraction enough.

He let his gaze linger on her for a moment, curled up on a sofa reading an incredibly thick book. He tilted his head sideways to read the spine, "War and Peace, Vol. 1" Pain seared through his forehead following the jagged edges of his scar. It had flared off and on but never like this. Never this intense, for so long, he rocked backwards on his chair and went crashing to the floor.

He snarled as the pain faded and found himself looking up at a cluster of concerned faces. "Voldemort's pissed about something," he gasped, "really pissed." He let his mind and memory relax, trying his best to sort through the confused tangle of images and put them

in the right sequence, "Something he wants done, is not happening fast enough. Really liberal with the Cruciatus... and I think he might have killed someone."

He felt the words coming out of his mouth, certain they were true. He did not know how, but strangely he just did. "You are sure?" asked Fleur quietly. He rubbed his eyes with his hands. Little stars erupted in them and he nodded.

"You can read... Voldemort's mind?" asked Ginny.

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It's more like... his mood, I suppose. I'm just getting flashes of his mood. Whether he's happy or pissed off," He smiled as somebody handed him a vial of headache reliever, "He's all extremes with no middle ground, old Voldie," he said with a laugh.

Nobody asked because it was a stupid question, but they were all thinking it: What was it that Voldemort wanted done that was not happening quickly enough? "He's not a linear thinker is he?" said Luna suddenly, "Sure he has more than one plan in the works. Can you tell what this was about?"

Even with his advanced Occulemency, Harry found it difficult to sort the alien flashes of memory in to something useable, until he managed to catch a few snatches of conversation, just a few words, "Something to do with Unspeakables.... A department.... A prophecy." He whispered the last to himself. "no idea what any of it means," he said, sitting up.

"I think you should lie down," said Fleur quietly, "Take a short rest, it's not like you have any classes to attend." It was true that his only lesson on Fridays was Defense against the Dark Arts, followed by an early start to the weekend. She nodded towards the parchment on the table, "I can do that, and send out the notices." His head still pounding, he did not notice the sly smirks and half-hidden smiles as he rose and exited, with Fleur close behind him.

"Ten galleons say his good mood will be even better after his nap," said Neville, framing the last word with air quotes.

"Sucker bet," said Colin with a look of jealous envy. Luna smiled serenely.

The spell chain leapt from Harry's hands the moment the door closed, giving them complete and total privacy as she wrapped her arms around his waist to half hug him and half drag him back towards the bed. She knew his moods, their ebb and flow and when it came right down to it, Harry could be a brooder and she knew she had to cut that off before it really got started. He sprawled on to the bed and she leapt upon him like a cougar, pinning him to the mattress. Their eyes met, and the corners of his lips twitched, as if he was hiding a smile, "Playing grumpy?" she asked.

"That depends," he kissed her gently, "Is it working?"

"When I said you should take a nap, I meant take a nap!" she sat up, pulling her legs under her yet somehow managing to keep him pinned down, "did you not understand what I meant?" Deftly he turned and had their positions reversed, and suddenly she was the prey - very willing prey. He growled, wordlessly as she vanished their robes and tossed her wand aside.

They had made love in a variety of moods. Sometimes it was long, slow, tender and romantic. On other occasions, it had been more like this one: Hard, fast and rough. The details of it all did not matter, merely that they were together was enough to bring them both comfort, safety, security and beyond that hope and above all else, happiness.

Having worn themselves out, she glanced at the clock. He was getting so much better at this, "Harry," she asked dreamily, still glowing with post orgasmic bliss, "Where did you learn that trick with your finger?"

"Which one?" he replied. She gave him a look and both of them laughed as he pretended to buff his fingers on a non-existence shirt, "You mean that one?" She nodded, "It's amazing what you can find in the library," he said, feigning complete nonchalance, "If you know where to look."

"And how did you know where to look?" she challenged.

"I bribed Madame Pince," he answered, "I'm not the first student to make... discreet enquiries. In fact, she muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "like father, like son," whatever that

means." He ran one hand along her side, simply enjoying the feel of her skin under his touch as they cuddled together. With the fire crackling in the grate, it was not long before they were both fast asleep. It was an excellent use of a Friday afternoon.

He looked around, and realized that he was walking along the same windowless corridor. His footsteps echoed in the silence. He kept walking. There was only one direction to walk. The walls were covered in branches and leaves. He stopped. Was he back in the maze? He pushed onwards, and the plants began to thin out, revealing bare black stone. This looked like some part of the ministry he had seen before. There was a door ahead. It somehow looked familiar but he could not place it. He stretched out his hand and could feel magic radiating from it. His fingertips were inches from it.

"Harry! Sir!"

He snapped upright, wand outstretched. The fire had burned low in the grate, and Fleur was gone. The second thing he registered was the presence of Dobby, standing at the foot of the bed. "What's going on?"

Dobby brought a levitating cup of coffee to rest on the bedside table before speaking, "Ms. Delacour asked me to wake you. The Halloween Dinner is to be served in half an hour. Ms. Delacour has taken the liberty of inviting your friends to dine and celebrate. Griphook and Marinashka also sent word: They can drop by later tonight, in time for dessert."

"How are arrangements working out in the kitchen?" The two elves got along well enough, except when it came to the kitchen. Harry had been forced to mediate their differences, finally telling them to split up the courses between them and to alternate so that nobody hogged the starters, mains or desserts.

"Well enough Harry," he replied, "Winky has the starters tonight and the main is mine. I will be helping with Dessert." Harry nodded and closed his eyes, trying to get rid of the image of the corridor and the heavy door at the end of the corridor, "I... heard you muttering in your sleep. Bad dreams?"

"Not really bad," said Harry as he took the cup of coffee and drained half of it in a gulp, "I've had a lot worse."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked

"Not now, Dobby, but thanks for the offer." He stretched and cracked his neck and back. He pointed his wand and brought life back into the smoldering embers, throwing light around the room. He looked up suddenly, "Wait a moment- there is something you can do for me," said Harry, "I need a place where a hundred people can gather, to practice, to study and learn without being discovered by other students, teachers, or caretakers."

The elf hesitated for a moment, "Dobby knows the perfect place. It is called the Come and Go room, or the Room of Requirement! It is a room that a person can enter only when they have serious need. I used it when Winky was... drunk on butterbeer... before Harry hired her" he added hastily, "And Dobby knows Mr. Filch has found extra cleaning materials there when he has run short, sir, and □"

"And if you really needed a bathroom," said Harry, suddenly remembering something Dumbledore had said at the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, "would it fill itself with chamber pots?"

"Dobby expects so," said Dobby, nodding earnestly. "It is a most amazing room, sir."

"How many people know about it?" said Harry, sitting up straighter in his chair.

"Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir."

"It sounds brilliant," said Harry, his heart racing. "It sounds perfect, Dobby. When can you show me where it is?"

"Any time, Harry Potter, sir," said Dobby, looking delighted at Harrys enthusiasm. "We could go now, if you like!"

For a moment, Harry was tempted to go with Dobby. He was halfway out of his seat, when he decided not to risk ruining dinner and incur the wrath of his girlfriend. "Not tonight, Dobby," said Harry reluctantly, "This is really important... I don't want to blow it. Can you

just tell me exactly where this Room of Requirement is, and how to get in there?"

Most would have been hesitant to trust the word of a sometimes, overactive house-elf, but this was not the Dobby of the past. Dinner that night was a relaxed affair, and Harry decided it would be better to give credit where credit was due, having Dobby explain the location of the Room of Requirement on the "Seventh floor, opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by trolls."

The starter went down well and it was after the main course had been cleared that Harry stood to address them, "I know things have gotten a little out of hand," said Harry, "I know most of you are teaching everything from Defense to charms, potions and everything else. Here's the deal: I don't know who can be trusted. So, I want each of you to bring only those you feel can be trusted, to pass this parchment test. We start small. Very small. You want someone in? Then at least three of you have to agree that someone is trustworthy enough."

That caused a firestorm of protest for every corner, "If you don't like it, then you definitely are not gonna like this: I have an executive veto. I cannot allow one person to jeopardize this! I will not!" Harry had silenced all of them with that simple statement. They knew exactly what he meant, what he was talking about it. "I once asked you, if you would stand with me. You said you would. This..." he shrugged, "this makes it official."

"Winky!" she entered the room, deposited a parchment upon the table and left. She was no longer the same elf. Like Dobby, she had undergone a similar metamorphosis. She was no longer the butterbeer intoxicated elf of the year before. She was quiet, elegant and light on her feet, wearing a black dress with subtle red trim and a pair of low heeled shoes. She could have had the same uniform as Dobby but had politely refused it in favor of something more feminine, which she had designed and stitched herself.

She returned a few moments later, to announce the arrival of Griphook and Marinashka Thaz-Dom, both of whom received greetings and welcome as the friends that they were by the gathered teens, "Did we miss dessert?" Harry smiled and shook his head, "Then we should proceed." The goblin drew a slender case from an

inside jacket pocket and Harry eyed it with distaste, before turning to his friends.

"Honor and loyalty, before profit," he said to everyone, "Read it, understand it, ask all your questions, and then sign it." It was not an overly long document but its purpose was clear: It bound all of them to secrecy. They could not discuss what took place at these meetings with anyone who had not signed the parchment.

"I'll ask the obvious question," said Colin, "What happens if we do talk?"

"A number of things: it will start with the equivalent of mental slap to the back of the head," said Griphook, "Though I'm loath to admit it, everyone can make a stupid mistake at some point. After that, it will get worse, until well... let's just say that since you are all underage, the worst will be complete public humiliation, that will probably make you wish you were dead."

"That, last part stays between us. Public humiliation of a traitor will at least make clear that there is a traitor in our ranks.... And we know that there is already one, with educational decree number 24," said Harry as he opened the slender case and extracted the quill it contained. Harry was the first to sign, and winced as the back of his hand slashed open as he wrote, but almost immediately healed over.

Fleur eyed the artifact warily, "Blood Quill?"

"Not just any blood quill, Fleur," said Griphook, "You are familiar with the blood quills used by Gringotts to seal contracts such as marriage proposals and so forth?" She nodded, "It is one of those quills." He took the quill and signed, followed by Marinashka.

"Then I will sign," she said, adding her signature on the fourth line. She met Harry's questioning gaze, "You don't do things by halves. This way, you know the secret is safe." Signed by all present, Griphook copied the parchment and returned the original to Harry. The students would never sign in blood, and Harry did not plan on that being necessary: Blood ensured that his friends could not betray them even under coercion, of any kind. It was not about trust. It was about protecting all of them, from each other if necessary.

Marinashka produced a small bag, "A master and two hundred receivers. It was a little tricky getting the size and weight down but, we managed." She opened it and passed out a number of rings. Marinashka presented him with a simple yet tasteful platinum band, about half a centimeter thick. "Mandatum to activate," she said, "First four numbers are date, last four are for time. Just focus on the date and then the time, and it will appear on the ring. Then "traditum" to send and "Finite" to cancel. They need a drop of blood, and then they are keyed to you: Only you can use the concealment charm, and only you can read the date and time."

Comprehension dawned quickly as everyone picked one and Marinashka demonstrate quickly how to acknowledge a message and to use the built in concealment charm. Harry was getting a feel for the small device when Dobby interrupted, "Apologies for intruding but, shall I put dessert under a warming charm?"

"Don't you dare," Harry said, "I think our business is concluded. Molten chocolate cake anyone?" that was met with enthusiasm all round, "Would you care to join us?" he asked the Goblins with a smile of his own, "I know Marinashka has a bit of a sweet tooth," she grinned at him, "and a mutual associate managed to track down a particularly rare bottle of Sun Blonded Single Malt by Mackay."

"Flattery and bribery, ," said Griphook with a shake of the head "Will get you just about everywhere."

The gathered friends had missed the Halloween Feast, and none of them thought anything of it until Myrtle floated through the wall and went right through Griphook who convulsively gripped his glass, and no wonder: Sun Blonded Single Malt by Mackay retailed for over a thousand galleons a bottle, and that was if you could find one. "Harry! The Headmaster has sent the ghosts looking for you," she paused and looked round the room, "Well, all of you! You've all missed the Halloween Feast!"

"Don't suppose we could just stay in hiding until they go away?" asked Neville.

"Nah, I've got a better idea," said Harry, "Accio Trunk!" his trunk zipped out of his room and everyone scrambled for cover, "Oh shit!" said Harry before the heavy piece of luggage took him full in the chest. The trunk bounced off and landed on the floor unharmed.

Harry on the other hand went skidding across the floor until he collided with the wall.

He rose to his feet and winced, as he cast a diagnostic charm that confirmed his suspicions, "Somebody heal that for me!" while basic healing charms were simple enough to master, some were incapable of getting any results with a particular branch of magic. Harry's strengths were clearly Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration. Healing would rank as his number one weakness, "Anybody know how to heal broken bones?" he gasped. It took only a few minutes to set the bones right before he was ready to move, "I didn't think I'd actually get to use this thing so soon!"

"Listen to me, very carefully," he said, "You can't apparate through the wards of Hogwarts, but you can apparate within the castle. Get to the Entrance Hall and head out in to the grounds." The twins, Fleur, Griphook and Marinashka vanished without a sound. He grabbed Luna by the arm, "I'll take you by side along apparition," he handed his invisibility cloak and the two he had stolen off Tonks and Moody to the last three. "Get out on to the grounds and find us! Look for the blazing fire by the lake!"

"Dobby! Winky!" both elves appeared with a pop, "you know what a barbecue is?" They both nodded, confused, "Headmaster and Umbrige are looking for us."

"Diversion?" asked Dobby

"Barbecue on the lake?" asked Winky.

The elves looked at each other and then back at Harry. With a firm nod apiece, they vanished. Taking a firm grasp of Luna's arm, he brought them to the entrance hall and lead the way down to the grounds. When they were far enough away from the castle, he pulled his trunk from his pocket and enlarged it. Spinning the combinations he opened it up and extracted a plethora of objects that had everyone looking at him in amazement, "What?" he asked defensively, "So I went shopping and went a little nuts during the summer."

"A little?" asked Fred.

"More like totally nuts," said George.

Fleur grabbed each of them by an ear, "Now boys," she said, "Behave yourselves." Harry had not noticed the exchange as he barked orders to everyone. Within minutes, they had the barbecue blazing, lanterns, warming charms, tables, and chairs set up and scattered about... as if they had been outdoors for hours. A few moments later, Dobby and Winky appeared with enough food and drink for twice as many people, "House elves," said Fleur, "Always over prepared."

Both elves made an impressive show of setting things up, and getting the minor details of used plates, cutlery and half finished drinks in order. They had even managed to find a few half filled rubbish bags. "Do I want to know?" asked Harry.

"Dobby would suggest... no." answered the elf as he expertly vanished half a bottle of butterbeer, dirtied up a stack of disposable plates and cutlery while grilling a half dozen sausages, and some chicken wings, "Dobby would also suggest, not asking Winky about it." Harry decided that he would stop asking how his elves got things done.

It took only a few minutes before all of them were reasonably comfortable, and Dobby, with Winky's assistance, was serving dessert all round when they saw the first hint of trouble. At least, Harry saw it that way with Dumbledore striding across the grass towards them, "Good Evening, Harry," he called.

Harry's fingers clenched but with an effort, he managed to relax and calm himself. Too many witnesses present if things got out of hand. "Evening Headmaster," he called in reply, "Is everything all right?"

Dumbledore took in the assorted gathering of students and managed to prevent his jaw from dropping in surprise. It was not the presence of Fleur, but that of the two Goblins. Taking a moment to compose himself he strode towards the group, "Professor Umbridge has expressed some concerns over where you disappear to on a regular basis Harry," he nodded to the other students, "likewise your friends, and other associates."

"Yeah well," Harry shrugged, "I proposed a barbecue and everyone thought it was a good idea, so we barbecue."

"In such weather?" he asked.

"A couple of charms and its quite comfy," said Harry, "Griphook, could you pour me a half measure? I'd like to try it." In the half-light, Griphook did not miss the raised eyebrow and the goblin did his best not to smirk, as he poured a finger's worth of the golden amber fluid and handed the glass to Harry.

Dumbledore could only watch wide eyed as Harry sipped the alcohol. He was only fifteen! He was about to object when he remembered something of crucial importance: This was no mere minor, but an emancipated teenager, who was no doubt testing him. "The Firewhisky to your liking Harry?" asked Dumbledore cordially.

"Not really my thing," said Harry. "But this," he raised the glass as if he was toasting the heavens, "This is like liquid heaven. Nothing beats Sun Blonded Single Malt by Mackay." It gave both goblins and Harry a perverse sense of pleasure to watch the headmaster's eyes bug out of his head for a moment, "If there is nothing else?"

The rest of the evening passed without incident and wrapped up shortly thereafter. Of course, by breakfast the following morning, word had spread about Harry's impromptu Halloween party. Not that he really cared. It was on Tuesday that Harry made his way up to the seventh floor with a certain piece of aged parchment in his hand and confirmed the truth of the Room of Requirement.

Wednesday, was their first meeting and he realized that seventy students were going to be missed, so this meeting would have to be short and to the point. Each of his friends had followed his instructions to the letter, bringing in only those they thought could be trusted but also pass the parchment test. When the last of them arrived, he waved his hand at the door carelessly and the door locked itself. "There are seventy of us, and frankly, we will be missed if we gather like this. Five groups of fifteen," he said without preamble, "You want in? Read and sign, otherwise you're done here."

There were the usual questions about what they were signing but once answered, with the equally usual answers regarding self-preservation, and secrecy, they signed their names. Inwardly, Harry wanted to scream in frustration. Fourth year students were more interested in learning real defense, in preparing for the real world

than the government, "You are all underage right now," said Harry calmly, "But I can teach you to fight, and I can teach you to defend yourself and above all else, I can teach you how to run and save your lives."

Harry glanced at his watch, "Right, we start with the basics: Endurance, stamina and how not to get hit by any curse: Dodging." There was a chorus of grumbling, "Shaddup," he snapped and the grumbling ceased, "You signed, you're in. Magic start next week, so come prepared: Charms, Defense, Transfiguration. Review and learn it, because you are learning how to fight. This is not about grades. This is about staying alive."

The room changed, as what looked like a four badminton court appeared, "We," he said, "are going to play dodge-ball." He suddenly sported a predatory smile, "It's just like it sounds: dodge the ball, pick it up and make someone else dodge. You get hit you are out. Let's play!" It quickly proved his point: Harry and his friends were barely winded and the last ones standing. Everyone else was out.

He glanced at his watch and swore quietly, "Where the heck did time go?" They had only managed two games but he was sure he had gotten the point across about the need for stamina and endurance, "A real duel will be more challenging, more draining, so get in shape. Start working out. If nothing else, you'll be healthier and live longer for it. One more thing," he dumped the contents of a sack across a table that had just appeared, courtesy of the room, "Take one each."

Everyone seemed confused by Harry handing out silver jewelry of exceptional make and quality but it was not long before everyone had a ring. "This is the messy part," he said, as an array of needles appeared on the table, "A drop of blood on the metal will activate the charms."

There was a moment of hesitation before everyone had a drop of blood on a ring. The metal band glowed for a moment, red then blue as it absorbed the blood, and everyone could see the eight numbers on the ring, "Concealment charm is keyed to you. Only you can activate it, and deactivate it. First four numbers are the date. The second four are the time. It will glow to tell you the date and time of the next meeting for your group."

He glanced at his watch again, "Our time here is up. So one last thing: Welcome to The Legion. Now get outta here before Filch or worse catches you out of bounds!"

Harry felt as though he were carrying some kind of talisman inside his chest over the following two weeks, a glowing secret that supported him through Umbridge's classes and even made it possible for him to smile blandly as he looked into her horrible bulging eyes. The Legion resisted right under Umbridge's nose and he took pride in the accomplishment of those he was teaching. All were making progress with Legilimency and Occulemency. Not much but enough to recognize a probe, which would do for the moment and their spellwork increased in leaps and bounds. Each student's progress was a satisfying memory: How Dean and Lavender had mastered the blasting curse. Cho and Ernie had managed a corporeal patronus, Siobhan Greene had an incredibly powerful stunning curse at her disposal. Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet had turned out to possess something of a talent for healing magic and Angelina had developed shields strong enough not only block but also repel curses and send them flying back towards the caster.

He was finding it almost impossible to fix a regular night of the week for the different groups, as they had to accommodate Quidditch practices for three separate teams, which were constantly rearranged due to bad weather conditions. However, Harry was not sorry about this; he had a feeling that it was probably better to keep the timing of their meetings unpredictable. If anyone was watching them, it would be hard to make out a pattern.

As the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin drew nearer, the Legion continued to meet. Though some were absent due to the demands of daily Quidditch practices by Captain Angelina who put the Gryffindor team through a punishing series of daily practices, regardless of the weather.

Although Harry said nothing, it was clear to his friends that the prospect of the upcoming match, more than he was not in the thick of it was eating away at him. He had confided as much to Fleur. The twins did not need to look that hard to see that Harry really wanted to be playing in the upcoming match. However, after a long discussion, and weighing the pros and cons, they said nothing. They figured that Harry would say something, come the time. After all,

Harry did not like other people prying in to his affairs, and they were not going to pry.

The Twins were surprised when Harry dragged them aside for a word in private, about Quidditch, "I wanted you to hear it from me, not from someone else and definitely not through the gossip grapevine," he took a breath, "I won't be at the match on Saturday."

Neither of the twins reacted and that surprised Harry. "Honestly Harry," said Fred, "What would have been surprising is if you had been there."

"Don't worry about us, we can look after the team," said George, "and we'll send Malfoy a couple of bludgers with your best wishes for a long stay in the hospital wing." Harry grinned at that.

"We know what Quidditch means to you, so don't worry," said Fred. "Get out of the castle for the weekend, practice your French or practice your French."

"Ah... the language of love," said George adopting a saint like pose with his hands clasped together as if he were praying to the heavens.

For the first time in a very long time, Harry James Potter blushed ever so slightly, but managed to keep his composure, "Jealous much?"

"Totally jealous!" they chorused.

Later that day, he would have a similar conversation with Ginny who proved to be just as understanding about the situation and Harry left via the Residence Floo to his Scottish Manor that Saturday morning, looking forward to spending time with his godfather and girlfriend.

Chapter 40

Backlash

When Harry returned to Hogwarts after a relaxing weekend spent with Fleur and his godfather, he could not help but stop and stare at the assembled students in the Great Hall. Though everyone was sitting down and eating breakfast, it was like looking in to the canteen of a battlefield hospital filled with the walking wounded: More than half the student population was sporting bandages, bruises, cuts and from the looks of it, a few broken bones were in the mix as well.

For once, his entry did not stop traffic as he made his way along the Gryffindor table and found his friends, "Seriously guys," he said with a shake of his head, "I went away for the weekend, and I come back to find that it's like you guys went to war. What happened?"

Ginny who had a few bruises showing on her forearms shrugged, "Well, I caught the Snitch."

"Gryffindor won the match," added Luna serenely from behind a black eye.

"And we kept our word," said Fred.

"Draco's still having the bones in his left leg growing back," Harry winced in sympathy, "It's a shame that Poppy managed to re-grow the bones in his arm and his teeth." Summarized George.

"Not that they inflicted all that damage," said Neville seeing the look on Harry's face, "Ginny was diving for the snitch, and Draco went after it too. When it was clear he wouldn't reach it in time, he grabbed a hold of her broom." Neville, Harry noted, had a large bandage around his left forearm, and seemed to have a slight limp.

"That's when," interjected Colin, "Gryffindor's own super smash brothers took Draco off his broom with two well aimed bludgers." Colin never wore glasses, but he was looking at Harry from behind a matching pair of black eyes.

He looked over at the twins. The pair seemed none the worse for wear, "Broken nose, black eye, cracked a rib," said Fred, "but we've been working on a few things and the test results were good.

"Same, same," said George, "except I got a broken finger in the bargain."

"Would somebody like to start at the beginning?" said Harry as he drained his second cup of coffee and poured himself a third.

"Well..." said Ginny, "It was like this..."

Saturday had dawned cold, windy and a weak sun was peering through the clouds. The match had gotten off to an ugly start, but Harry could attest to the fact that any match where Slytherin met Gryffindor was a match that had the potential to get very ugly, real fast. Things had rather gotten out of hand from the first whistle onwards. Instead of a blow by blow rendition, Harry opted for just the highlights reel:

From the moment the Quaffle went airborne, Blagging and Blatching had been flagrant from the beaters and chasers on the Slytherin Team. Proof enough was that eleven penalties were awarded to Gryffindor in the first seven minutes of play. The chasers had converted three of them putting themselves thirty points up.

Angelina ordered a full on retaliation, and demonstrated that the gloves were off when she'd blurted Crabbe in to a barrel roll before blatching Goyle face first in to the Hufflepuff House stands. Two penalties to Slytherin in the eighth minute, and they successfully converted one while Ron managed a spectacular save with the tail of his broom against the second.

With the Slytherin beaters out of action for the moment, the twins had exploited the opening, mercilessly. Bludgers are not exactly "fire and forget" projectiles. In fact, they function as more of "fire-and-pray-they-hit-the-target." However, with Fred and George Weasley doing the firing, they kept their promise: Malfoy took three Bludgers to the chest and back, and was nearly knocked off his broom. Three penalties to Slytherin, and they converted one.

Ten minutes in, and the score was 50 to 20 in Gryffindor's favor, when Ginny spotted the snitch and went after it. Battered as he was,

Draco had pulled out the stops, resorting to blagging Ginny's broom. The loss in speed and punch in the face from Ginny to Draco allowed the Snitch to vanish. A penalty was awarded to Gryffindor for blagging by Slytherin and another penalty was awarded to Slytherin for the physical assault by Gryffindor. Neither side converted their shots.

It got ridiculous after that as the Slytherin began haversacking the Quaffle through the Gryffindor goalposts. Ron had managed to block two such attempts but the third was accompanied by a double Bludger attack. Even Harry had conceded that nobody willingly stays in the path of a Bludger, let alone two. Even more ridiculous was that the goal was actually allowed and then a penalty awarded, that Angelina converted.

Then it escalated when the Slytherin Chasers began Stooging to try and score which won Gryffindor another two penalties.

Ginny had punched Malfoy in the jaw again for yet another Blagging offense and this time both teams converted their penalty shots. Her second punch knocked out two front teeth that the first had probably loosened. However, the Slytherin goalkeeper resorted to flacking and while the goals still counted, Gryffindor converted several more penalties.

Those were just the highlights in what was perhaps the dirtiest twenty-three minutes of Quidditch that Hogwarts had seen in about a century and a half, before Ginny caught the Snitch and ended the match 210 to 40 for Gryffindor.

While the match had ended, it was the aftermath that had proven... traumatizing. Though the teams had landed, Malfoy had started hurling insults and abuse as always, about blood traitors, mudblood lovers. What he had not expected was for three Weaselys to work out some of their anger issues. Ginny had gone in with a beater's bat, Fred had used his fists, and George had a wand drawn.

Of course, Malfoy's cronies had stepped in with wands drawn and fired first. Not that Snape or Umbridge could be convinced of that by the hundred odd witnesses in the stands on the Quidditch pitch or making their way back to the castle. Trained as they were, the trio had easily side stepped the barrage. Ron, who had his back turned,

took two bludgeoning hexes and stunner to the back and was out like a shattered light bulb.

The other spells had gone wide and hit a number of other Gryffindors who had immediately retaliated, drawing their own wands and firing back. "Not too sure how Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw got drawn in to the thick of things," said Ginny, "All I knew was that suddenly it was a free for all."

"Spells flying every which way," said George

"And some pretty nasty ones too," added Fred, "I heard cutting charms, bombardment curses, even a reducto or two."

"Those came from the Slytherins," added Colin, "Crabbe and Goyle, specifically." Colin chuckled darkly, "They won't be casting spells until they find their wands, or get new ones."

"So I went away for the weekend," said Harry, "and while I was gone, all hell broke loose on the Quidditch pitch followed by all hell breaking loose in general. Who put a stop to it?"

"Well...it didn't stop, more like fizzle out," said Luna, "When it came down to it, it was Slytherin house, half of their fourth, fifth years, and perhaps all of their sixth and seventh years, against about eight-five students from the three houses."

"Yeah, but a special seventy stood their ground," said Neville, "and I think they handled themselves well enough." He hesitated to continue.

"What?" Harry asked as his mind spun over the possibilities.

"Well, blame was placed squarely on Gryffindor House, specifically, Fred, George... and me," said Ginny. Harry found himself mentally bracing for the hit, "All three of us have been banned from playing Quidditch... and Umbridge confiscated our brooms."

"Not so bad there," said Neville, "Every house lost a hundred points, flat out, and then ten points for each person involved in the... free for all. Slytherin lost about one-sixty total. Other houses lost between one-thirty and two-twenty points in total. We lost two-twenty."

Harry nodded, "Looks like I missed a good match and an even better show."

"That's not the worst of it...." said Ginny hesitantly.

"What else?" asked Harry, "Two hundred twenty points gone, lifetime bans at Hogwarts for Gryffindor's Beaters and Seeker, and the Legion's membership pretty much exposed at a glance. I thought it couldn't get any worse."

"Harry... you know the Whomping Willow?" asked Neville, "Well... it got hit in the chaos... by your broom."

Ginny held out the box that contained the pulverized fragments of his Firebolt, "Sorry... Harry."

He sighed, "Four years I'm here, and that's two brooms that bloody tree owes me..." he looked at the gathered, somber faces, "What else?" he asked almost tiredly. He had just had a relaxing weekend and had returned in to the jaws of hell.

"Educational Decree number Twenty-five," said Ginny quietly, "was signed by the minister and passed." She handed him a roll of parchment, "Copied it off the notice board..."

He scanned through the document and read the amendment twice to make sure he understood it, and didn't believe it:

"The High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members."

"So much for a compromise working out," Harry thought bitterly. Umbridge was going to be a major problem in his near future. There was no doubt she was going to come after him, and perhaps others close to him as well. "Banning half the Quidditch team is nothing. She's just getting started."

Strangely enough, the following few days were quiet. Most of the simmering tension amongst the student population was exorcised on

Saturday and the castle seemed to be going through a period of relative calm. It was the middle of the week and he was already at dinner when he received the note from Dumbledore. It made its way around the table and the circle of friends trashed it out, they could not figure out a reason for the meeting. Even the date and recent articles in the Daily Prophet and The Quibbler had nothing worthy of note, beyond the usual mudslinging, "Guess I'll go see what the old man wants," said Harry with a shrug. However, he made a note to keep his shields at full strength, as he stole a surreptitious glance up at the staff table where the headmaster was more picking at his food than actually eating it. Harry shrugged and turned his attention back to his steak and kidney pie.

He was there at precisely eight-thirty, outside the gargoyle. It sprang aside and he mounted the flight of stairs that lead to the headmaster office and knocked upon the door, "Come in Har... Mr. Potter."

Harry shut the door behind him and collapsed into a chair, "Headmaster Dumbledore, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes... I have word... from France," the headmaster hesitated, and then passed a parchment scroll across the desk, "It is work from Madame Maxime." Harry flexed his fingers towards the parchment on the desk. Satisfied he lifted it, unfurled it and began to read.

He paused and reread several lines, then read the rest of the letter. The writing was cursive, in a long flowing script that he found difficult to read, "There is no date on these events," he said quietly. "How long ago did it happen?"

"About six weeks ago," replied the headmaster, "it is my best guess. Madame Maxime was injured quite badly and it will take a few more weeks before her new arm takes as it supposed to. It is a wonder that she survived at all," he added.

He read the letter once more, "So Hagrid... is dead?" Having read the letter several times, a few lines stood out, glaring at him and he in turn glared at the headmaster. The half-giant gamekeeper and he had been close. The relationship was as special as it was different. Hagrid had been the one to introduce him to the magical world, to Gringotts. His first wand, his first birthday cake and his first birthday gift. He struggled and managed to keep his emotions in check. So

many "firsts" that any normal child would have experienced with family not a near total stranger.

The headmaster was simply content for the moment to watch. He had done his best, to probe the boy's mind, with a feather light as possible touch but had encountered mental wards and defenses of strength and completeness that he knew he would not be able to breach without alerting Harry. The truth was that Hagrid had long been a potential ally of Harry's, ever since the events of the previous year when he had tried to use Hagrid to pass some information about the tournament. It had taken some powerful spell work to "convince" the half giant to set off in to the mountains of France. Madame Maxime had been far simpler to convince and she'd gone along with the prospect of recruiting Giants to fight for the light with tremendous ease.

"Let me get this straight," said Harry meeting the headmaster's gaze for the first time, "You sent two half giants, out on their own to look for their own kind. Magic does not work so well against Giants. One wand would barely be enough to stun one."

"Harry," said Dumbledore carefully, "Are you implying something?"

"Heck no, headmaster," he snapped, "I'm not implying anything! Hagrid has been shortchanged his entire life! You were Transfigurations Professor in Hogwarts when Tom Riddle opened the Chamber of Secrets, but you let Hagrid take the blame for it when you knew it was not likely to be him! He lost his rights to a magical education! To a wand! Even after he was cleared you never gave him the chance to pick up where he left off!"

Fawkes watched in silence from his perch: This argument was heating up, and becoming dangerous, and the headmaster had surreptitiously drawn his wand underneath the table. "I am not implying anything. I am accusing you of sending Hagrid to his death!"

"Harry, please, I need you to remain calm," implored the headmaster. He was actually hoping that the boy would lose some control, so that he would find a way in to his mind. He had to know just what Harry was up to, how well developed his magic really was, amongst many other things, such as Sirius who had not been seen or heard from in almost a year. His mental probe drifted in and out, on the edge of

Harry's consciousness trying to spot a weakness in some very impressive mental defenses.

It worked as Harry seemed to draw magic from the air around him, his eyes flashing a dark emerald green. A burst of Phoenix Song cut through the wall of anger surrounding Harry for a few moments, but his rage was out and it drowned out the phoenix song and all its calming effects. However, those few moments were long enough for Dumbledore's mental probe to feel, rather than see the presence of another mind, in not only the boy's mind but also one that passed through the Occulemency barriers. He was quick to follow, but not quick enough to evade detection.

In the real world, Harry's eyes snapped up to meet the headmasters with a gaze of cold fury, "You dare?" he whispered, "You dare!" he was incensed, "The last time you tried to mind fuck me in that alley, I was lenient. This time: No mercy!"

Duels involving just the mind arts are rare occurrences amongst wizards as there are few who are accomplished enough with both Occulemency and Legilimency. The pair sitting in the headmaster's office of Hogwarts was one of those rare pairings.

With Albus already within his mind, the needle like probe was engulfed in a net of inky blackness and began dragging it out of his mind. Harry made good progress as the blocking move was backed by all the power he could, stunning Dumbledore in to inaction for a moment.

The headmaster let his probe disintegrate until it was a million pinpricks of light and then tried to withdraw. Harry was having none of that. He reinforced the outermost wall and then the inner wall that guarded his most personal and the most important of secrets. Trapped between two walls, Dumbledore's mental probe had nowhere to go, "You're in my head Dumbledore!" shouted Harry inside his head, "This is my domain! This is my battlefield! I am God here!" The dancing lights rebounded off and Harry showed no mercy, engulfing each one in the same obliterating wave of darkness.

Dumbledore had far from given up as he slammed another two probes in to Harry's defenses. Distraction and feint worked well, as the second probe began to bore through the wall of steel and stone,

while the third became liquid, like mercury, intent on slipping through the cracks.

Forced to split his attention, Harry dealt with the probe attempting to cut its way in to his mind, he brought the wall to life, surrounding and encasing the mind before dropping it in to the same inky blackness that contained the first.

The liquid, mercury like probe had succeeded in its task, only to meet its own liquid counterpart. It was akin to watching a pair of amoeba duel as the two probes battled for dominance and supremacy. However, the battleground was Harry's mind, the battleground was his and he used it to that effect, conjuring multiple probes of his own, until he had subdued Dumbledore's third, and final Legilimency probe, lumping it together with the other two probes in the small cage he had conjured for them.

That was precisely what the headmaster had hoped for: The combined strength of the three probes working in concert achieved what one could not. The probes shattered the bars of their cage and slammed in to the second wall, the one that protected everything of importance.

The advantage was clearly Dumbledores, and Harry knew it. He let training and instinct guide him. He broke eye contact with the headmaster, weakening the assault slightly, and reconfigured the way he stored his memories, even as he threw up additional barriers to keep the headmaster occupied, while he searched for the right memories.

"Memories can be used as weapons," said Marinashka, "Those of your pain, of your loss can be fed to an overeager mental intruder, but be wary of what you reveal in such a fashion, for your enemy can learn much about you, by what pains you." Those were the Goblin's words on the subject, and Harry had taken them to heart:

"You are so eager to see what is in my head!" Harry snarled, "Let me show you! Let me show you what haunts my sleep!" A heavy steel truck, with a dozen locks upon its edges came to the front. The locks did not come off so much as the trunk exploded, and Harry focused the memories in to a tight probe of his own.

He found the leading edge of the headmaster's own probe easily enough, and invaded, infecting it with every memory of pain, suffering, loss and heartbreak he had lived through in his fifteen years of life:

The first time Dudley had "accidentally" knocked him down a flight of stairs when he was five

Getting whipped by Vernon for scoring better than Dudley in school when he was six

The repeated physical abuse at the hands of Dudley and his so called friends that left him bruised, with fractured bones, and one or two broken ones on a fairly regular basis.

The birthdays he spent locked in the cupboard under the stairs.

A snarling and vicious bulldog, snapping at Harry's heels and chasing him up a tree in his relative's back garden while the whole group of bastards had watched and laughed.

Aunt Marge, referring to him as a "pup" that should have been drowned at birth, due to "weakness."

Vernon sucker-punching him repeated when he was six because he could not mow the lawn in straight enough lines

Lying in bed, damn near starving to death every summer, waiting for the can of cold soup to come through the cat flap in his room door.

Snape dropping a well-made potion on the dungeon floor when Harry had already cleaned his cauldron, glaring at Harry and daring him to say something.

He rammed home the memory, the emotions, the pain, the fear of his second year when he lay dying in the Chamber of Secrets.

Those were just the opening blows: the memory that haunted his sleep haunted his life: The night of June 24, 1994. The last day of the Triwizard Tournament, the night of the Third Task, the night Voldemort was reborn. The night he lost the first woman who showed him what love was and how powerful it could be.

"Harry!" the voice screamed at him, "Enough! Stop!" Rowena, Lady of the Castle, could not believe the anger and rage kept bottled up within the young wizard, and the way it simply boiled out of him, it was as if there was something malicious within him to drive such fury, "Do not become him! Do not become worse than him!" she shouted to him, only to find herself suddenly locked within a cage, inside his mind.

His attention split, Dumbledore was able to break the assault and drive him back. Forced to retreat, Harry took a moment to gather his faculties. "Harry! Do not disappoint her! Do not fail Hermione! What would she think? What about Fleur? She loves you Harry! Don't turn your back on that!" That shattered his mental focus, and he was on the defensive now. He weakened the barriers enough to give the Headmaster an opening. One, he was relieved to see, that the headmaster took willingly and withdrew completely from Harry's mind.

It took Harry a few moments longer to recover but Harry was on his feet, the mental duel having exhausted him. He stood holding his wand in a trembling hand, "I'm done with you. I cast off all ties and sever all relations with you!" His tone softened, "I almost became something worse than you. And to think I once looked up to you. When will you see it? When will you understand? I am not a boy anymore. I have never been much of one. I will not be led, nor will I follow blindly. After what happened last year... I was still willing, for the sake of the Light to try, and work with you. You are supposed to be the leader of the Light. You are supposed to be a beacon, a symbol of all that is right, and good. You are supposed to lead the Light? You would lead it in to the Darkness. The Ministry is supposed to be a government that stands for justice, for the rights of all wizarding kind, whether wizard, witch, Elf, Goblin, Centaur, or Half Giant. It refuses to accept what's coming. It cowers and it lies. It cannot govern."

"Umbridge once asked me whether I knew what my greatest sin was," he said, "Right now, I'm becoming a pretty big fan of all seven. But Wrath seems to be a personal favorite of mine. Voldemort, Snape, Umbridge, The Ministry, The Daily Prophet. You, on the other hand, are now number two on my shit list."

"I don't know..."

Harry laughed, "Oh please! You know exactly what I am talking about!" the wand did not move, "You are the reason I had the childhood I had. I never had enough food! I never had decent clothes! I lived in a fucking cupboard for ten years! I was a slave to those filthy muggles!" His magic flared and the glass in the windows cracked, shattered and blew outwards. "I was their slave! And you knew it!"

'Harry I swear that if I had any idea-'

"Do not. LIE. TO ME!" he roared, as his rage and hatred rose yet again. A whiplash of magic shattered a shelf and the collection of delicate silver, spider like instruments, "Figg! Arabella Figg! She was your precious order spy! She was watching me all the time! She must have said something!"

"Enough!" said Dumbledore standing up, "I am not what you make me out to be Harry. I am truly sorry for what you have gone through all these years, and I admit that I made a mistake. However, it is important that you do not become embittered by that."

"My brothers and sisters will know about this conversation," he growled, "and we will act as we see fit! They are too young to have to do this. To learn to fight, to duel, and to kill and to then have to live with themselves for taking the life of even a Death Eater. They are not me."

Harry turned towards the door of office, "They are children. However willing they are, I will take their innocence from them. I will give them tasks, responsibilities and burdens that most adult wizards shy away from. I will take and mould them in to men and women. And in all likelihood, many will die before they can truly live."

His hand was on the doorknob and to his complete lack of surprise, the door locked, "They will make a sacrifice, because they chose to, because I ask them to," he said bitterly, "I will ruin lives by making soldiers, warriors and guardians in Legion strength. And then lead them in war. And if I could make a deal with fate and destiny, trade my life so that they can live in peace."

"The Light, and the Ministry of Magic, can fight their own damn war. I'll deal with you, all of you, on my terms." He turned to face the headmaster, "Now can someone unlock this fucking door for me?"

To the headmaster's shock, the door did exactly that, swinging open without a sound, "Thank you," said Harry as he marched down the stairs, the door swinging shut behind him.

Everything he had just heard, everything left him troubled, greatly. What on Earth, was Harry talking about? What did he mean by ruining lives? Legion strength? He absentmindedly reached towards his bowl of lemon drops only to find that the candy had melted under the ferocity of Harry's magic. The boy was no longer under any semblance on his influence or control, but at least Hagrid, a potential turncoat had been dealt with. Now it was time to deal with other matters.

Chapter 41

Christmas Recruitment

Saying that there was tension in the Castle would have been an understatement. All of Harry's friends had witnessed his latest run in with the headmaster via pensieve, though that did not show the duel of the mind arts. They were all silently relieved that they were all gaining proficiency with the mind arts and would be able to detect and expel an intruder. Harry himself had admitted that the duel had no real winner or loser, "I had to use something and I gave him access to memories... of my childhood. Memories I'd rather never remember or think about." In the aftermath, it had taken him several hours to separate those memories and restore them to that secure, walled off section of his mind.

Since the impromptu showdown two weeks before, Dumbledore had not been above trying to manipulate others in to helping him. By the beginning of December, every friend he had at Hogwarts had been called for a chat with the headmaster. It was only with the help of his invisibility cloak and Rowena that he was able to pull quite a fast one on the headmaster.

Harry was inside his office, every time the headmaster had a chat with one of his friends, augmenting their Occulemency to keep the headmaster out of their minds. What did not go unnoticed by other students, was the subtle and gradual shift in some of the students who followed the lead of Harry's friends, if not Harry himself. While many of the professors saw it, none of them knew what was going on with the shift in stance towards the Headmaster, but also the fact that there seemed to be more inter house friendships, and relationships blossoming. The only house that remained in isolation was Slytherin itself. Not that anyone seemed to give a damn about the house of Serpents, and they did not seem to mind their isolation either.

It was clear to him that what was possibly a three front war, was now going to be a three front war. With an angry sigh, he threw down the quill, and looked across the room, at his sleeping girlfriend. Term ended tomorrow and everyone was heading home, except for Colin who would again, be staying with Luna. Of course, he was already home but his frustrations with the situation kept him awake. That

and his Occulemency had reduced his need for sleep to a mere handful of hours.

He rose and stretched out of habit and made his way over to the bed. Her hair was scattered across the pillow, one long shapely leg sticking out from under the duvet. He watched her, the rise and fall of her steady breathing for a few minutes, before he slid in to bed beside her.

The frame creaked at the extra weight and she rolled over, pulling herself close up against him. No matter when he went to or went back to bed, she would always pull herself close, and just hold him as she slept. He was not sure if she was aware of what she did, but he did not mind. Let that be a small mystery between them. Half an hour later, his mind clear, he let himself drift off to sleep.

His dreams were formless, nothing specific, vague shapes, flashes of color. Nothing he could make sense of or understand. Then the dream... changed...

His body was different: smooth, powerful and flexible. He was gliding between shiny metal bars, across dark stone. The floor was tiled with black stone slabs. It seemed somehow strange yet also familiar. He was flat along the floor, sliding on his belly. Movement ahead, out of the corner of his eye.

With a start, he realized that he was inside something, a creature, watching through its eyes, the way it saw the world through mesmerizingly vibrant colors. Someone was seated on the floor, a cloak wrapped around them. He saw a flare of violently pink hair, head dropped upon her chest.

His tongue flickered out from behind his teeth, tasting the air, tasting the scent. A woman. Young and no doubt tender. He felt a longing to bite, to sink his fangs in to her flesh and feed but it mastered the impulse... he had more important things to do than feed. The door was not far along the corridor from this sleeping sentry.

She stirred. Harry froze, too little too late. She jumped to her feet, a bright blurred outline of motion, a wand snapping out from a wand holster similar to his own. He had no choice, whatever he was in had no choice. It reared back upright, like a king cobra and struck.

Fast. Rapid strikes. Fangs plunged in to flesh, he could taste the metallic copper tinge of blood on his tongue, on its tongue. He felt flesh part, ribs splinter and the gushing of warm blood. There was a scream of pain, then silence as she slumped backwards against the wall and slid down. Blood splatters decorated the wall as she slumped to the floor, her wand rolling out of reach.

His head was ablaze with fire. The sound of rushing blood thundering in his ears, it was like a white-hot sheet of metal was clamped across his forehead, "Harry!"

He felt something touch him, and his body reacted, pure instinct. Magic blasted from his hands, flames and eldritch witch lightning. Ice crackled across the bed. His eyes flew open as he bolted up right, panting, gasping for breath as if he had just run a race and lost. Sweat soaked his skin as he looked around, wild eyed, wand in hand. It took a long few moments before his brain was able to process everything he was seeing. He rolled across the bed and threw up.

He took a deep gulp of air, and pushed himself up right, "Fleur? Are you ok?"

She waved him off, "I'm fine Harry." She waved her wand over her arm, healing the minor burns along her arm, "I've had worse during the tournament," her voice trailed off, "Are you alright?"

"Someone has been attacked, in the Ministry," he panted, chest heaving. The little light from the embers glowing in the grate made it clear that it was the middle of the night. What was worse was that he had no way of gaining access to the Ministry: He could not apparate through the wards, and the Floo would probably take too long. His mind spun and latched on to numerous possibilities but none of them found sufficient traction.

Fleur hesitated, "Are you sure? It was a dream..."

"It... was different. I was not watching things happen, I was watching things happen as the Snake." He almost cursed aloud: The one person who would probably have people and resources in the right location was Dumbledore. He would have to improvise. "Fleur, ever been to the ministry?"

She nodded, "Give me a moment to change."

"Dobby! Winky!" he called, "Wake Blake and Remus and prepare the infirmary for one incoming!" The elves vanished and Fleur gave him a critical look, "I don't know what we're getting ourselves in to here," he said with a shrug.

A moment was all they needed before they were in motion, taking the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron in London before apparating to the visitor's entrance and cramming themselves in to the phone booth where Fleur dialed in a string of numbers.

As the dial whirred smoothly back into place, a cool female voice sounded inside the telephone box as though an invisible woman were standing right beside them, "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Er ..." said Fleur, "Harry Granger and Fleur Pot...Porter... medical emergency?" she suggested, almost tentatively.

"Thank you, visitors, please take the badges and attach it to the front of your robes." Of course, neither of them were wearing robes: Both were dressed as muggles and hidden under a battery of Glamour charms just in case. There was a click and a rattle, and Harry saw something slide out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. He picked it up and handed the silver badge with Fleur's name to her. "Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

The floor of the telephone box shuddered. They were sinking slowly into the ground. Harry watched apprehensively as the pavement seemed to rise up past the glass windows of the telephone box until darkness closed over their heads. Then he could see nothing at all; he could hear only a dull grinding noise as the telephone box made its way down through the earth. After about a minute, though it felt much longer to Harry, a chink of golden light illuminated his feet and, widening, rose up his body, until it hit him in the face and he had to blink to stop his eyes watering, "The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day," said the woman's voice.

They stepped out and found themselves in the atrium, surrounded by the banks of elevators, "We need to get down, seven levels to the

department of mysteries." They were in luck as they hopped in to the first available elevator and began to descend. Harry drew his wand and Fleur did likewise, "Stealth pattern," he said, "and stay out of sight,"

She nodded and cast the disillusionment charm over herself. Harry followed suit. They exited and broke in to a dead run down the corridor, one that looked remarkably familiar to Harry. With a jolt, he realized why. It was the same corridor that appeared regularly in his dreams. They were almost to the end of the hallway when they found the victim, "Auror Tonks," said Harry, "I'll cover, you heal!"

Fleur waved her wand over the wounded Auror, casting a series of diagnosis charms in rapid succession, "She is weak, barely alive, I... I cannot do much..." her hands were busy as she poured potions directly on to the massive gaping wounds that had ripped open the Auror's flank. Blood Replenishment, bruise reducer, a few basic healing and stasis charms repaired some of the damage, but clearly not enough.

"Phoenix tears... What I would give for phoenix tears!" thought Harry. He looked down at Fleur, her hands covered in blood as she struggled to do three tasks at once. He shrugged, what could it hurt? "Fawkes! Help!"

A blinding flash of flame erupted and the phoenix appeared before them, its wings spread as it came to rest, gently next to Harry, "Uh... can you help her?" he asked. The phoenix gave a gentle trill and hopped towards her. As Fawkes cried in to the grievous wounds the couple breathed a sigh of relief as the broken rib bones began to knit back together as muscle began to grow over, hiding the bones from view. "Thank you, Fawkes."

"Harry, we need to get out of here before someone..." she froze. Distant footsteps became the sound of running feet, several sets of feet.

"Aurors," thought Harry as he looked around them. The corridor was just that: A corridor. There were no doors to other rooms, or windows, not even an alcove of some kind to hide in. Disillusionment charms would not hold once they started scanning. "Evanesco, scrougify." That at least took care of the physical traces of evidence.

"Could you transport us out of the Ministry Fawkes?" asked Harry, "I would not ask, but needs must." The phoenix gave another thrill and spread his wings. They grabbed a tail feather each, supporting the still unconscious Tonks between them and within moments, they reappeared in the alley behind the Ministry building.

"Thanks Fawkes," said Harry. The phoenix seemed to nod in comprehension before vanishing in yet another blaze.

"Harry... we might have a problem," said Fleur hesitantly, "She's... an Auror."

"Oh she's more than," said Harry, "She's also a Metamorphmagus and what's worse is that we were acquainted, very briefly during the summer, when I beat the stuffing out of my cousin."

"We... are not going to just leave her here? Are we?" she asked.

He hesitated for a long moment, she was safe enough, but was definitely in need of medical attention. St. Mungo's would not work because somebody would ask questions about an unconscious Auror being brought in by two teens. Pomfrey was out, given that she would report everything to the headmaster first chance she got. No. there was only one way. They were gone in the blink of an eye, back to the mansion, their unconscious visitor in tow.

Between Blake, Remus, the two house elves, Harry and Fleur, there was little that they could do for the unconscious Auror, now lying fast asleep in the infirmary. "Phoenix tears did most of the repair work, but its blood loss now. The only cure for that is time," said Remus when Harry checked in on her for the seventh time that morning, "And you need to stop popping in here like a house-elf with nothing to do."

"I could ask you why you haven't left her side," said Harry with a glance at his watch, "Rest of us had breakfast downstairs. You had Winky bring yours up here."

"Your point?" asked his former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, staring out the window and across the grounds. The sun was low in the sky, through light across the landscape with an almost careless ease.

"I'm not blind, Moony," chided Harry gently, "Is there something I should be aware of here? Or is this something I should pretend I never noticed or saw?"

"What do you want me to say?" he challenged. There was an edge of sadness there, "I made a choice, but it was not a choice that I made just for me. It was a choice I made for my friends, and while my friends, even Lily, would have applauded my choice, I never consulted her on it, and I made a different decision, in regards to... us." Actions have consequences and though he was not responsible, he still felt as if he was, "I'm not blaming you Harry," added Remus hastily, "I didn't think of everything when I crossed the floor that day."

"You thought you'd lost her?" he asked quietly, "Then you very nearly lost her for real." The werewolf nodded, "I'm not dense but stupid question: Your... condition did not bother her?"

"With the Wolfsbane potion, I go away for a few days a month around the full moon. So, it's never been that big of a deal. She knows where I go for the change just in case. I don't know why she... feels... felt what she did..."

Harry cut him off, "You don't know anything about what she felt, or what she still feels! You two were still in touch weren't you?" he nodded, "You spoke? Met up for drinks?" He recognized the look he was getting and got to the point, "If she still did not have some feelings for you, she wouldn't have bothered." Harry stood, "Don't let her go, Remus, just... don't." he took one look over his shoulder at Remus, still sitting next to her, "Love... it's not easy to find. We both know that."

It was only in the evening that she finally stirred and woke up, "Where... Remus?" she blinked her eyes in surprise, "Where... am I?"

"I can't tell you that," he answered truthfully, "But I can tell you, that you are safe."

"What happened?" she was weak, and not fully aware of her surroundings, but with a sudden burst of energy she sat upright, "The Order!" she struggled only to find herself far too dizzy as she fell back in to bed, "I need to tell them,"

"I sent word to the Order," interrupted a voice, from beyond her line of sight, "That you had been injured, and were being cared for."

She recognized that voice almost immediately, "Har... Harry? Where am I?"

"Safe," he answered, "As to where, you don't know and nobody here will tell you," he held up his hand to forestall the inevitable protest, "You are not a prisoner, or a hostage. Once you're well enough, we'll drop you in Diagon Alley and you can do whatever you please." He shrugged, "Probably tomorrow after lunch." Harry nodded to Remus and he scowled back, but he gave her hand a squeeze, and the werewolf departed, muttering something about getting dinner.

"Reading my mind Harry?" she asked slightly playful.

The thought had never occurred to him and his surprise clearly showed as she laughed. Clearly, she had been teasing him, he realized. He hesitated. It was not his place to say anything, not with someone else's love life, but he had, something of a stake, "Remus..."

"You know about me and the wolf?" she asked, "Don't be shy Harry. It is no secret that I love him. It's him, that's the problem," she sat up, "That, and the sixteen years that separate us. If you could convince him..."

He shrugged, "Convincing him is not my job," he grinned impishly at her, "Besides, with your abilities, surely you could do something to... shorten the gap." She met his smile with one of her own as she stared at him, contemplating what she knew. He was, beyond a doubt the most remarkable boy she had ever met. However, he was no boy. He never had been much of one. Moody was right about that. But that one legged, one eyed veteran happened to be right a lot of the time.

She could not help but smile, "If he was a few years older," she thought. She had joked to herself for a year or so, ever since she had heard of him the year before, and everything he had done with the Triwizard Tournament. However, it was a joke "Could never happen," she thought, "I've seen too many relationships fall apart for exactly this reason." She was young but had seen her fair share of

love life ups and downs. Men were frustratingly shy about asking her out, mostly because her metamorphagi abilities were the stuff of male fantasies. She did not resent that at all - besides it was fun to role-play. She smiled devilishly as she recalled the first time she had kissed a boy as someone other than herself: She was only fifteen; he had joked about kissing this particularly attractive singer.

She had done it to tease him, shifting her appearance to match that of the singer in question. His reaction had been, instructive to say the least. She had learned more than a little about male psychology that day, and during the rest of that... interesting summer. She smirked at the memories. She had enjoyed playing those games but had never known if they had wanted her for her or because she could look like anyone, they wanted. She shook her head and dragged her train of thought out of the gutter, "So what happens now?"

"You rest, or you take a very careful look around. Careful because I don't have phoenix tears handy and my healing magic sucks," he added hastily at her confused expression.

"How... badly wounded was I?" she asked, noting the lack of bandages for the first time.

"Severe sharp force trauma, penetrating wounds, some minor internal organ damage to the liver, one kidney and stomach, four broken ribs, three cracked," replied Remus who had come through the door bearing a tray loaded with food and drink.

There was enough there for two, Harry noted absently, not three. It clicked, "I'll leave you two to your dinner." Very lightly, he reached out with his Legilimency and sent a few.... 'images' to both of them. He bit his lip as he struggled to keep from laughing as Remus blushed and Tonks actually turned bright red, "And no excessive physical therapy you two!"

He dodged the spoon fired Jello and managed to roll out in to the corridor as the ham sandwich flew over his shoulder, laughing the whole while, "young love," thought Harry with a snort of laughter. He made his way down to the kitchen to find Dobby and Winky and see who was available for dinner.

The odd couple ate in silence for a long few moments, until Tonks finally sighed, "Remus... I know things have been... difficult between us." It hardly needed to be said that one of the chief stumbling blocks apart from the gulf in their ages, was where their allegiances lay, "I'm... not trying to pick a fight," she said slowly, "But I want to understand. That day, at the Leaky Cauldron, why did you choose Harry over the Order?" Over me, she thought silently.

He toyed with his sandwich a moment and deliberately took a bite of it, playing for time as he marshaled his thoughts, his arguments, "You've read Harry's file?" he asked. She nodded, "Then tell me what you remember."

That gave her a moment's pause, before she regurgitated pretty much whatever everyone knew about his last four odd years at Hogwarts with the Philosopher's Stone, The Chamber of Secrets, the Triwizard Tournament and then added what Remus himself had told her about the events of his third year.

"What do you know about his home life?" he asked quietly, "Before he was emancipated." She, like everyone else, knew next to nothing, "This is going to be... hard to believe." He told her everything and she sat, and stared at him, as if he was lying through his teeth to her, "I swear, all of it is true. The beating, the abuse, the cupboard, all of it, Nymph," he said, "And it has... created... or at least helped create the Harry you see today."

"But why is he so mad at Dumbledore?" she asked.

Remus shrugged, "He knew, Nymph. He knew all along, the way they were treating him, the way he was beaten up and used as a general purpose punching bag. Why Harry really hates him is because that there is no reason for Dumbledore to have put him there. There were explicit instructions in his parent's will that were ignored."

"I made the choice I did because I had already betrayed Lily and James once. I didn't want to do that again. I made that choice because Sirius never deserved his fate and I never even tried to speak to him to get the truth, and left him to suffer for thirteen years in Azkaban. Dumbledore knew about that too. He has always known that it was Pettigrew who was the real secret keeper, the real traitor."

The revelation literally floored the Auror, whose Jello had sat poised on a spoon for the past several minutes, half way between the plate and her mouth as she listened in disbelief, "He has good reason to hate him," she said quietly.

Harry had been standing just outside the door listening to the conversation but had stayed silent. Fleur and Blake were off somewhere, up to something no doubt. He walked in, "It's worse than that. The wizarding world believes him and follows him, almost blindly. There are those who follow him, the way Death Eaters follow Voldemort. Dumbledore has become accustomed to everyone doing what he wants, when he wants, how he wants. I refused and he doesn't like that. He thinks because he has power, four of the five most powerful and influential positions in Wizarding government and a reputation built as a leader of the Light that everyone should just bow down before him."

Tonks pointed out as she ate the trembling pile of Jello on her spoon, "But others can say you are doing the same thing: You think you should get your way because of who you are, because you are... well, the Chosen One, boy-who-lived or," she added with a grin, "Any other over hyphenated title."

Harry shook his head and laughed, "I commanded no one to follow me. I merely refuse to be lead around like a dog on the leash! You were there Tonks," he chided her gently, "That day at the Leaky Cauldron. I asked my friends to walk away, from my fight, from my war. They refused. They exercised their free will. They chose to stand by me. I commanded them to do nothing. Dumbledore forgot that somewhere along the way. He has his own scheme and plan, but forgets that these are people, lives, loved ones that he moves around like chess pieces." He leveled his gaze at her, "Are you free? Or are you just another chess piece on his board to be played and then sacrificed?"

"When did you get so wise Harry?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, "I'm fifteen years old and I've stared death in the face so often that him and me are becoming rather well acquainted." He picked up half a sandwich, "You've got a few choices to make Tonks, you can stand by the ministry, or you can stand by

Dumbledore, or you can stand by me. But you have to make a choice."

True to his word, the following day, Tonks was escorted from the Manor with nothing more than a blindfold around her eyes. Remus held her wand until they arrived via the Floo in Hogsmeade's Three Broomsticks before apparating to Diagon Alley's Leaky Cauldron. Remus hesitated for a moment, "I made a choice," he said, "And I sometimes regret what that choice cost me, cost us." He pulled her in to a hug very suddenly, "I'm hoping, that you'll make the choice that doesn't cost us anything more."

Placing her wand into her hand, he apparated out of the Leaky Cauldron, leaving Nymphadora Tonks with a great deal to think about: First and foremost was what she was going to tell Dumbledore when she reported in. That sparked a thought: Did she have to report in?

The term ended peacefully for all parties and most of them got on with the most important thing: Christmas gift shopping. Harry had done most of his shopping in record time but was still agonizing over what to get Fleur: Trying to figure out what to get her was driving him up the wall. Moreover, it had driven the unfortunate Blake, Remus, Winky and Dobby up the wall, across the ceiling and down the other side.

Of course, Harry was not the only one agonizing over the perfect gift for a special someone, it seemed that all of the boys were in a similar boat. A quick few correspondences by owl and the boys had arranged a last desperate shopping trip to Diagon Alley to try and find something appropriate.

Chapter 42

Tis' the Season

Snow had fallen and lay thick upon the streets and roofs of Diagon Alley giving the center of British wizarding life an almost classic Christmas postcard look. The fact that fairy lights were on sale along with all the other decorations of the season and some amazing discounts being advertised just made it clear that Christmas was less than two weeks away.

Already there had been a few gift related scrums in the stores, and in one incident, the Auror's had to be called in to break it up before it spilled in to the streets. Harry, Ron, Neville and Colin however, had missed the show and were all breathing much easier, having found a suitable something or other for their girlfriends whom they were scheduled to meet at Florean Fortescue's in a few minutes.

"Hello, gentlemen" said Fleur, leading the pack of four girls towards their boyfriends.

Harry quickly shrunk the box in his hand and stuffed it in to his pocket, "Afternoon ladies," he said in greeting as he gave her a kiss, not wishing to draw attention to the fact that they were barely one door away from the jewelry shop where he had just bought her gift, "You look fantastic, as always."

"Jewelry shop?" she commented with a smile.

"Yes," said Colin smoothly, clapping Neville on the back, "Neville here wanted something pierced." That earned Colin a glare, "But he couldn't decide."

"That kind of thing isn't done at a jeweler," said Luna knowingly, "But I'm guessing he couldn't decide what he wanted to get pierced?"

"I know a place," said Ginny suddenly, "Other side of the Alley. It's where I got my ears done."

Neville knew he was beaten and was unwilling to go through with actually having something pierced, "Harry was buying you jewelry."

"I'm half veela, half witch, but still woman," protested Fleur with a smile, "And not a complete idiot either! But lunch waits."

They walked, as a group and had barely made any progress when George piped up, "The great greasy one himself, outside Florean's."

"And that oathbrea..." Harry bit his tongue, "Ron's with him." They spread out, ever so slightly but kept walking and passed the odd pair without incident. However, they were well aware that they had picked up a red haired tail, "Guys, not blaming anyone but, did someone tell Ron we'd be here?"

"Well, we had to ask mum you know?" said Ginny, "he probably overheard or something."

It damped their mood as they strolled in to the ice cream parlor, "Florean," said Harry.

"Harry," replied the owner. That was all it took for every single person to stop whatever they were doing and to stare at him for a moment before everyone's attention turned back to their own business.

"You make it a habit of living under those glamour charms," said Fleur, "At first, I didn't understand but now...." She shrugged as they sat down and consulted the menu. The ice cream was as good as ever and they ate well, talking lightly and teasing each other for clues about the nature of their presents.

"Perhaps I should buy a bracelet while I'm here," mused Fleur aloud, as she stared at Harry and licked her spoon in a very suggestive fashion.

He could not take his eyes off her, or that spoon, "Good idea," he said lightly, wishing he was the spoon in her hand. Her antics were causing a slight problem at the table, not that either of them noticed.

"Perhaps a necklace would go well with that bracelet.... Perhaps I should go visit that jeweler you were coming out of," she continued.

"Just don't buy the duplicate sword of Gryffindor..." he blurted, "Aw crap. I just gave it away."

She finally set the spoon down with a pout, "Harry! You know damn well that my parents got me one for my birthday!"

The table exploded into laughter as they ate and drank and made merry, as the twins demonstrated a number of their products on themselves and everyone else. The bill came and Harry settled it as a matter of course but before they could rise, a shadow fell over Harry, "Potter," said Snape, "One would think you would have the common sense to change your disguise, especially since everyone is aware of it!"

"Smells like too much Sneezezy's hair oil around here," said Harry, ignoring him for a moment, "Something I can do for you Snape?"

"I am a professor of Hogwarts and I will be addressed as such!" growled Snape like an angry bulldog.

Harry rose and turned, putting his face within inches of Snape, "Indeed, you are a professor at Hogwarts. But, this is not Hogwarts, nor a regular semester. The hell are you doing interrupting us anyway? Not like we bothered you on the street earlier. So what do you want?" hissed Harry through clenched teeth.

Snape met Harry's gaze without flinching, "How extraordinarily like your father you are," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting, "Arrogant, cocksure and overconfident. A little talent on the Quidditch pitch and he was a cut above us all. At least that was what he thought, no doubt, strutting about Hogwarts as if he owned it with his gaggle of admirers, worshippers and bootlickers..."

Harry's wand never made an appearance, he never raised his hands but everyone at the table noticed the circle he drew with two fingers before he clenched it in to a fist, moments before Snape toppled over like a felled tree. The rest watched in stunned silence, like every other person in the ice cream parlor as Harry reached in to the man's robes and extracted the man's wand, "This is not Hogwarts, this is not in class, nor over homework. This is a private interaction between two private citizens." His voice was deadly calm. "I ask you, politely never to speak ill of my father again, or I will challenge you to an honor duel, where honor is satisfied when only one walks off the field." He stepped over the frozen Potions Master as his friends gathered around him, "Secondly..."

The blast rocked the alley and they froze for a moment. Harry blinked, as if he was registering the blast on a different level, a subconscious level. It was not so much the noise or the shaking, but the screams of the terrified and fearful, streaming past the ice cream parlor in the opposite direction, away from the blast.

He was the first out the door and in to the street. He was the first to run towards the explosion, unlike the fleeing tide of wizards and witches. It did not take him long to find the site of the blast. It was a store that had gone unnoticed until this moment. However, those standing in black robes and silver masks of the dozen or so wizards standing around, firing hexes and curses in every direction were a better attention grabber than the flaming ruin.

Glass storefronts shattered, sending knives of broken glass lancing in every direction. He had a shield in place, deflecting the rain of deadly shards. He did not need to look over his shoulder to know that he had eight to their twelve wands. "We have surprise on our side," he thought, and made a note: They were going to have to do some group training on how to handle these kinds of conflicts where teamwork would make a difference. For now, he realized they were going to have to wing it.

They had moments before the Death Eaters noticed them, "You four, blasters and reducto, bring down a wall and block their line of retreat towards the Cauldron! The rest, shields, overlap and stay on me!"

Diagon Alley is essentially the main street of a network of streets that fan out for a few blocks in just about every direction. However, the Alley itself began at the Leaky Cauldron and ended in a cul-de-sac that housed a few apartment buildings - where Fleur had once resided - and Olivanders Wand Shop.

The blasting curses from Colin, Luna and the twins packed more than enough power to bring down the front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, and distracted the dozen until a quartet of well-aimed volley of spells dropped three of the Death Eaters like sacks of potatoes. With their opening volley, the Legion had almost evened the odds, as several jets of dark green light began streaking back towards them, "Break and cover!" screamed Harry.

They went to ground as the Death Eaters began firing back, using almost nothing but killing curses. Where possible, someone took a

potshot back but all they were doing was keeping each other's heads down and interfering with the spell casting, "How long can they keep that up?" asked Colin.

"No idea," replied Neville as he stood, and fired back with a Blasting curse followed by a pair of rapid Reductors and ducked as an unidentified jet of violet light came back at him, "We need to break this deadlock now!"

"This might help," said Fred, hefting the small parcel, "Portable swamp... we don't have them working perfectly yet, but it should create a small, sticky problem."

"No better time to test it than now," agreed George as his twin brother levitated it, letting him banish it down the street. There was a howl of indignant protest as the swamp activated and mired them in a foot of muck.

"Charge!" roared Harry, breaking cover as he unleashed a spell chain of devastating power. Though they had hesitated at the first blast, this time there was no hesitation as they moved forward, Reductor curses and blasting hexes from three of them, pulverizing a Death Eater.

The two sides were a spitting distance apart when a flash of flame announced the dramatic and overly flashy entrance of the Order of the Phoenix - right in to the middle of the firing line.

Legions best and brightest, their charge checked, sought cover while the Order sustained immediate fatalities as killing curses cut several of them down. "Fucking idiots," growled Harry.

"The lesson here," mused Luna, "is that one does not apparate into the middle of battle!" Harry watched the Order members fight. He was...unimpressed, "Are you... seeing this? Believing this?"

While the Death Eaters fought to kill, it seemed as if the Order was unwilling to do so. The former used Avada Kedavra throwing everything and the kitchen sink in to the battle. The order seemed to favor stunners and seemed hell bent on trying to capture some of them alive. The only one, he noted actually trying to kill Death Eaters was Mad Eye Moody with one real leg and one real eye, he was twice the fighter of anyone else out there.

"Prongs," whispered Harry, "Take a message to Moody." The deer appeared in a flicker of light and galloped towards the scarred veteran. "Follow me!" He led them down a side street and cut across an empty alley between buildings, "We're going to hit their flank," he said by way of explanation. He pointed his wand in the air and a shower of golden yellow sparks erupted.

The Death Eaters took a pounding as some thirty hexes and curses slammed in to what was left of Quality Quidditch Supplies. "Breach!" The wall erupted inwards, spraying stone and wood everywhere, knocking the Death Eaters off their feet, leaving them stunned with their ears ringing, unable to mount a defense. They simply lay there, as the Legion claimed their wands with summoning charms and followed Harry's lead: Snapping every single one.

"What the hell are you doing?" growled Moody, as he watched them snap their wands, "Those wands would be proof at their trial!"

"What?" said Harry, incredulous, "Did you miss the Avada Kedavra's? How about the robes? The masks? Oh yeah," he ripped their sleeves and found the Dark Mark branded on their forearms, "Is that proof enough?"

Harry met Auror's glare head on, "I saw the fight, and you were the only one who had a clue what they were doing," he had an audience now, comprised of those order members still standing: Dedalus Diggle with his purple top hat, Doge Jones who was torn between looking at Harry and at the carnage around them. Hestia Jones, his wife, crying over the lifeless corpses of several other Order members.

"What, the fuck, do you think this is?" he asked in disgust, gesturing to the bodies around him. There were more than just those that had fallen in battle, but at least a dozen more, killed in the initial act of terror against a sporting goods store, "This is war! War!" he shouted, "The first shot was fired six months ago! This is, perhaps, a skirmish! Skirmish! God-damn-it, this was not even a battle!" he glared at the gathered ranks of the order, "You think we're still at peace? Look all around you!" He gestured to the rubble, the destroyed buildings, the corpses strewn over the battlefield.

"You want to fight? You want to stop Voldemort? Then you need to accept the fact that expelliarmus and stupefy will not cut it! If you will not cripple them, if you will not kill them, and then be able to live with yourself, you have no place here."

He looked over at his friends. Their eyes were blank, unreadable. Shock first, horror, then would come guilt and self-loathing, "War comes, and if you cannot kill, you have no place in battle! But you can contribute! Learn to heal! Learn wards! Make potions and supplies! If you cannot be the tip of the spear, or the point of the sword, be a part of the hand that holds it! Be a part of the arm that wields it!"

He looked at Moody, "Their spell work is sloppy and they miss more than half the time," his contempt was obvious but he decided to ram it home, "Fucking around with stunners, I ask you." He nodded to his friends, "six teenagers, a witch, and me, did more today than any of them," he hesitated, "But in all fairness, you're worth about ten of them."

Alastor Moody stared at the glamour ensconced teenager for a long moment, considering everything that he had just said. He had fought during the first war, he had killed more than he had captured, and he understood what it was to duel to the death. The young man standing before him was not Auror trained, but he recognized the style of combat all eight of them had used: up close, in your face, and very personal in conjunction with overlapping shields, and area of effect damage spells. All were trademarks of Goblin warfare.

"I'll leave the clean up to you," Harry said, "We're not going to hang around long enough for the Ministry." He glanced at his watch theatrically, "This is Diagon Alley, the ministry is not even ten minutes from here," said Harry quietly to him, "The Order reacted before the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. What does that tell you?"

The teens vanished from view. Invisibility cloaks, concealment charms, and chameleon charms evens. None of which shielded them from his magical eye, but it was impressive magic, to say the least. He watched the teenagers for a long moment as they made their way to the Leaky Cauldron, and then turned his attention to the Death Eaters, tied up, unconscious with their snapped wands lying

on top of them. He found himself wondering what to tell Dumbledore and more specifically, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Say what you want about the Ministry of Magic, its befuddled minister, the lies the Daily Prophet gleefully spread on the Ministry's behalf, but you could rarely find fault with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Though they had their own wing on one floor of the ministry building, it was "an outpost to keep an eye of Fudge" - not that you could attribute that quote to Director Amelia Bones.

In truth, the DMLE had its own building - more of a fortress complex - on the outskirts of London. It used to be just the Auror Training Academy, but under Amelia during the First War, it had become a centralized hub for everything the DMLE did, from raids against individuals suspected of smuggling in dark artifacts, to tracking down anti-muggle pranksters, and even keeping an eye on selected Potions Masters and lowlifes like Mundungus Fletcher.

"Madame Bones," growled Moody as a dozen Aurors apparated on to the scene, "Too little too late I'm afraid." He gestured to the bound and gagged pile of Death Eaters.

"Report, if you please," she said briskly. While technically he was retired, he was a former Auror, who had won nearly every commendation in the book.

He nodded, "Was doing some grocery shopping when this lot popped in, and decided to have a go at the Alley. No specific target, random destruction, chaos and carnage." He did not have to add that this was how things had started almost twenty years ago, "A group of... goblin trained vigilantes took care of this lot, mostly." She gave him a significant look, one that he pointedly ignored as she surveyed the number of masked corpses.

"Haven't had a chance to unmask any of 'em," he shrugged, "If you don't mind..."

"You're welcome to the duty," she said, arms crossed over her chest as he knelt over the first of them, keeping them covered with his wand before ripping the mask from the first of their prisoners.

Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody, had given more than an eye and a leg in the pursuit of justice, and had committed more than a few names

and faces to memory. He broke out in a smile at the first face: Alecto Carrow. He laughed in disbelief at the second: Amycus Carrow, "Like brother, like sister," he said, "The Dementors should have kissed you both the first time round." He noted the surprise on the face of Madame Bones with his own smirk of satisfaction.

The third face was a surprise: Augustus Rockwood, formerly an Unspeakable of the Department of Mysteries and a spy for Voldemort, "Hopefully, Azkaban will show you some rather... unspeakable things." Moody turned his attention to Madame Bones, "What took you so long to respond anyway?"

"We had a Death Eater incursion of our own," she said quietly studying the Carrows intently, "Six witnesses from various investigations now dead, eight Aurors killed in the line of duty, a further four wounded," she pointed at the Carrows, "And I killed Amycus Carrow at Auror Headquarters and Tonks brought the ceiling down on Rockwood and Percy Weasley. Shackebolt obliterated Alecto."

Moody spun round, "Wait, Weasley? Did you say Weasley?" She nodded tightly. It was the first time anything had genuinely surprised him in the past ten years, "Charms? Polyjuice?" he asked, going for the most obvious.

"No charms applied, and no Polyjuice potion found in them or on them," she said quietly, "At least, we didn't find any signs or traces on what was left of them."

They found a number of new faces, but things took another twist when they unmasked Avery, and then unmasked Percy Weasley yet again. "What the bloody hell is going on?" growled Moody.

"The only person who can answer that question, is the one person the ministry claims has not returned, and I doubt he would answer our questions even if we had him for questioning."

Unnoticed, a pair of wizards walked down the street and vanished at the far end of Diagon Alley in near silence. It would take them an additional two portkeys trips before they could apparate to their final destination: Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire.

Voldemort had abandoned his own ancestral home in favor of the Malfoys for one reason: The house was falling down or would fall down around them. The truth was that Voldemort could not bear the thought of looking out the window and over the graveyard where Harry Potter had defied him, in person, for a second time and survived the experience.

Of course, his Death Eaters, not even those he trusted and valued over all others such as Snape, Malfoy, or even Pettigrew, were privy to the innermost thoughts of the Dark Lord. And with good reason: The last thing he needed was for any of them to suspect that he actually feared, not only Potter but also feared exactly what it was that had been prophesied so long ago.

It was a sad fact that even the most intelligent of his followers could not comprehend that they were nothing more than mere tools, no matter how valuable their services or their money was. They were all means to an end... his end. Even the Malfoys, who clearly did not wish to admit that having His presence in their home was more than a bit disconcerting.

At the gates, Jugson and Snape raised their arms to the ghostly snake and were allowed to pass in to the grounds of Malfoy Manor through a powerful void shield that would have in all likelihood cut a trespasser in half.

"Did you see them?" asked Jugson, "Did you see them Severus? They moved and fought without hesitation. Perfect soldiers! Perfect!" he repeated, rubbing his hands together gleefully, "Obedient without question! Loyal unto death to our Lord!" he was practically crowing at his success, "Even those captured will not talk and even if they do, they know nothing!"

"Yes," said Severus calmly, "Their success shall, in all likelihood, earn you a place at his side, amongst the Inner Circle. Have you tested its full potential?"

Jugson nodded eagerly, "Dozens at least, if not hundreds! So long as the Prime lives, they all live!"

"It is a shame that the Primes will have somewhat of a complicated existence," said Snape with sneer, "restricted movement until this

war is won. And Percy Weasley, volunteering for this. I suspected he would be amongst the last to willingly risk his life and sanity for this."

"Oh, stuff Percy Weasley," said Jugson, "He just showed up and I did what had to be done. And everyone at the Ministry is in for a headache! Three Percys at least!" he roared with laughter, "I'd love to see those fools try and figure it out!"

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